Mission - Conversion - Dialogue:

The Christianisation Process of the Rishi in South-West Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the changing relationship over time (1856-1990) between the Rishi, an ex-Untouchable *jati* of Bengal/South-West Bangladesh, and various groups of Catholic missionaries. The material consists of intensive ethnographic fieldwork among Hindu and Christian Rishi, as well as research into historical sources on missionary presence. The new approach to mission initiated by Vatican II (1962-65) is contrasted with the phenomenology of dialogue as this occurs in the field. A common ground is established between this stance and recent anthropological theory intent on solving authorial crisis by adopting 'dialogic' styles. It is argued that the mere adoption of a dialogic genre does not provide a solution for textual authority in anthropology, nor does it solve the missionary impasse. The radicality of dialogue as an ethical involvement rather than a means to an end (either 'conversion' or epistemological certainty) or as a methodological tool, is further analysed through the tensions inherent in the 'translation' of the Christian message. The misunderstandings this generates and the variety of missionary positions vis-à-vis the Rishi and the wider society constitute the 'topoi' of multiple dialogues. The Rishis' experience of 'Untouchability' and their struggle for humanity expose the shortcomings of a missionary self and the possible hidden intentionalities of anthropological enquiry. The field situation of the missionary and the ethnographer alike provide a testing ground for theories of dialogue in modern philosophy. It is argued that it is principally in the Levinasian 'proximity to alterity' and the Gramscian concept of 'counter-hegemony' that dialogue becomes ethically and politically demanding, and that social anthropology, as a discipline interested in human dialogue and its tensions, cannot fulfil its vocation without making an ethico-political commitment.

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List of abbreviations

AME	Archivio Missioni Estere (PIME, Rome)
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BDG	Bangladesh District Gazetteers
BIMA	Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate (Asia/Catholic)
BIRA	Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs
BISA	Bishops' Institute for Social Action
BPA	Baradal Parish Archives
BSCF	Bangladesh Scheduled Castes' Federation
CBCB	Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh
CELAM	Conferencia Episcopal Latino-Americana
CMS	Church Missionary Society
CORR	Catholic Organisation for Relief and Rehabilitation (Bangladesh, later 'Caritas')
CSC	Congregationis Santae Crucis (Holy Cross Missionaries)
DAK	Diocesan Archives Khulna
ERE	Encyclopaedia of Religions and Ethics
FABC	Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference
FC	*'Fede e Civiltá'*
LMS	London Missionary Society
MO	*'Missione Oggi'*
OF	*'Our Field'*
OPF	Oeuvre Propagation de la Foi
PIME	Pontificio Istituto Missioni Estere
Sat.PA	Satkhira Parish Archives
SCPF	Sacred Congregation for the propagation of the Faith (*Propaganda Fide*)
SEDOS	Servizio Documentazione e Studi
SJ	Societatis Jesus (Jesuits)
SPA	Simulia Parish Archives
SX	Societatis Xaverianae (Xaverians)
XAK	Xaverian Archives Khulna

Note on transliteration:

All Bengali terms in the text are given in standard transliteration, mainly following Sukumar, *An Etymological Dictionary of Bengal*, Calcutta 1971, but without diacritical marks which are given in the glossary.

INTRODUCTION

'Dialogue', a recurrent term in the history of western thought, has increasingly become part of our daily vocabulary. Its original meaning referring to the orality of conversation has expanded to include communication, exchange, polyvocality, relationship, negotiation and their synonyms, revealing a multipurpose concept accommodating open and hidden intentionalities. This gives as a result a multi-layered word, almost a theme, hardly useful - it would seem - to assist analytical enquiry. This ambiguity, however, as part of the dynamics of dialogue, reflects the complexity of human relations. If it is true that "human cultural experience is coming to be viewed as a dialogue between partial truths" (Mumford 1989: 11), it should also be pointed out that questions of truth often embody questions of power. This can be the case when dialogue is utilised by those in power to protest their willingness to serve a good cause. My aim here is both to unmask a certain deception in the use of dialogue and to re-affirm its validity within two different but related fields: missionary activity and anthropological enquiry. In both fields, in fact, when matters have come to a crisis, 'dialogue' has been invoked to solve a perennial problem. This manipulation of dialogue, however, does not take account of various factors: firstly, the openness and uncertainty of the outcome that surround dialogue itself, independent of the intentions of the participants; secondly, the resourcefulness and ability of the counterpart to reply (and, for that matter, their freedom to ignore being called into dialogue); and thirdly, the variety of interpretations of dialogue greeted by both missionaries and anthropologists with a combination of eagerness and suspicion. As a result, instead of solving the crisis, missionary activity and anthropological enquiry were left on even more uncertain and problematic grounds. No easy solution can come from a 'nice' word (dialogue) used as a camouflage to continue the same game of invading the space of the Other, with the intention of either converting or representing him, unless the Self goes through a 'real' crisis, which implies a growth towards the discovery of the Other's proximity. In what follows I propose to challenge and re-affirm the use of dialogue in the field of missionary activity, since this represents an extreme instance of sophistry, but without neglecting the position of anthropology since both fail to justify the violence of their invasion.

Missionary enterprise was born with Christianity itself, and the Pentecost 'miracle' of talking in tongues represented both the cultural and territorial expansion of the new religion. This myth of origin has repeated itself for two millennia and when miracles proved insufficient, the alliance with secular powers helped Christianity to expand. Although these powers have withdrawn their support, Christianity continues to send those dedicated to announce the 'good news of God's Kingdom'. When 'dialogue' is invoked at this particular historic juncture to establish a renewed approach to the Other, the suspicion arises that the power of the sword (or that of money) have failed to obtain the desired results. This picture becomes more complicated, but also more interesting from our point of view, when some missionaries, both in the field and at home, decide to take dialogue seriously and,

contravening the authority of the Church, challenge, at least in part, their own vocation and identity, as these are understood at an official level. In re-addressing their own activity and way of being, they risk subverting the image of the missionary as one who goes abroad to make new adepts to Christianity. As we shall see, for many missionaries and theologians who have being shaken by the encounter with the Other, dialogue represents an alternative approach to mission itself. One of the first results is the feedback these missionaries provide to the communities at home so that the original experience of Christianity has acquired a different perspective and its understanding has substantially changed. The fear that the original message has lost its purity, can be compared with the absence of 'objectivity' in social anthropology when the discipline becomes too entangled with the Other, given that anthropologists, in addition to recognising the impact they have on societies they study, "in turn find themselves transformed internally by their informants" (Mumford 1989: 11). It is this level of uncomfortable and disquieting dialogue, as opposed to a dialogic genre of ethnographic writing or a general notion of missionary dialogue as *alibi*, that most interests me. For just as in the case of anthropological investigation, intent to go beyond positivism and scientism, "it is not enough to cast the 'results' into a dialogic form" (Fabian 1990: 765), so for missionary activity there is a need to face the internal upheaval of taking the Other seriously.

Despite a continuum of Christian 'invasions', history has witnessed many moments when dialogue has been the choice for missionary enterprise; these moments eventually came to be institutionalised and re-absorbed into the mainstream of the Church.[1] Present developments will probably follow the same course, but in the meantime they form a locus of resistance to the powerful structure of Vatican bureaucracy. Furthermore, much of the power of this centralised body has lately been disseminated to local Churches, and although foreign missionaries are said to be at the service of the local hierarchy, they also act as a stimulus to opening up the local church towards a reality wider than the Christian or mere Catholic community.[2] Whilst this varies in degree from place to place, it is more evident where Christianity is an 'insignificant' minority. The suspicion that 'official dialogue' serves its purpose in these particular cases must not preclude our desire to discover the sincerity of those missionaries who, in alliance with certain branches of the local clergy, use their resources to advance a cause in conflict with a more general and 'insidious' dialogue. Although the local hierarchy exercises the power of an officially recognised authority, the missionaries still maintain their economic power and through this pressurise the local bishops to respect their 'charisma', which often results in a dialogue far more radical than that officially proposed. On another level, the missionary community itself has gained a certain independence from the central bodies at home, and although the Vatican has urged General

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1 " Missionaries were often afraid of being converted to heathenism before converting others to Christianity..." (Duncan 1993: 52).

2 It should be remembered that Catholic missionaries rarely, if ever, embark on an ecclesiastical career, especially now that a local hierarchy has been established everywhere.

Superiors to recover much of the power lost in the process of decentralisation and democratisation, these superiors seem able to exercise a certain command over their subjects, but rarely have control over them. Those circumstances which have favoured the creation of an alternative missionary role have contributed towards a change in missionary identity. This has led to an excruciating dilemma, since by accepting the path of dialogue, the missionaries are putting their very existence into question, given that they are part of a powerful agency yet at the same time demand and seek to renounce power. This recalls the anthropological debate that "questions anthropological writing as a praxis of representation in a context of power more radically than the critique of genres" (Fabian 1990: 767). We will return later to Fabian's 'not-writing as part of writing'. For now it suffices to say that the risk taken by a radical missionary dialogue or by anthropological writing that resists representation 'while trying to stay in the presence of the Other' (ibid.: 770),[3] leaves my own writing in a weak position, given that my methodology, in line with this sort of enquiry, is less an attempt at validation and proof than an essay in 'fragile thinking'.

While the study of non-western Christianity, as a general and localised phenomenon, and missionary intervention in other cultures have increasingly interested social anthropologists and historians, the change in missionary activity and the role played by both local Christians and others in this change have not received equal attention. In this thesis I propose to analyse, from a dialogic perspective, the christianisation of the ex-Untouchables (Muchi-)Rishi of South-West Bangladesh and their interaction with various Catholic missionary groups over time (1856-1990). The importance given to dialogue both in missionary circles (cf. Amaladoss 1990; Swidler et al. 1990) and the introduction of this term in anthropology (cf. Dwyer 1977; 1979; 1982; Tedlock 1979; 1983; Fabian 1983; 1990; Maranhão ed. 1990; McGrane 1989) led me to concentrate on dialogue both as the place where new missionary trends (inculturation, adaptation, translation) can be tested, and as a need felt by social anthropologists for a different approach to Otherness.

In this introduction I present first of all my contact with the field and the general outline of the thesis. I then proceed to discuss the impact of official dialogue on missionary ideology and the multiplicity of positions this has created among missionaries. After an analysis of the use of dialogue in anthropology, I discuss briefly philosophies of dialogue as found in Bakhtin, Gadamer and Levinas. The choice of these authors goes beyond the mere fact that they have already been suggested as relevant to social anthropology. From my perspective, more than their contribution to anthropology, we should take into account how anthropology can validate their theories, given that all three place great importance on re-assessing western metaphysics from the point of view of alterity and sociality. In this sense, my reading of these authors is of direct relevance to the missionary-Rishi encounter, particularly

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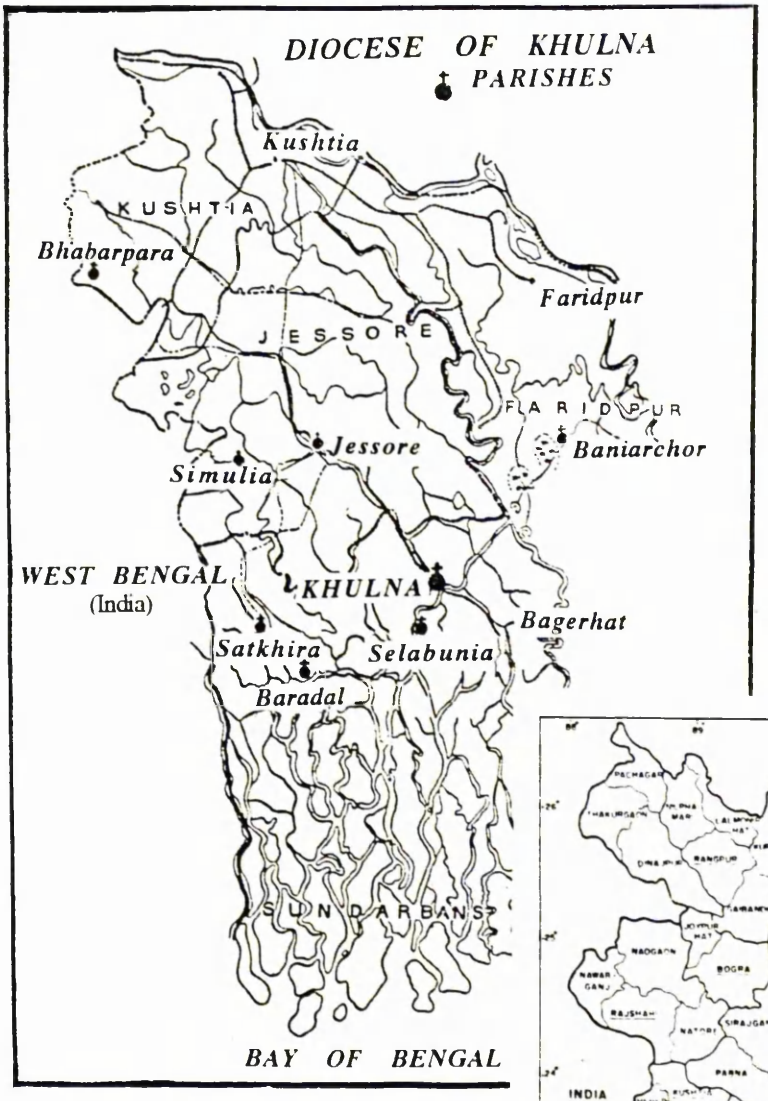
3 I would prefer here the Levinasian 'proximity' rather than presence, although I do understand Fabian's play on words between 'presence' and 'representation'.

as this is happening in its most recent phase. It goes without saying that this represents a moment of theoretical clarification of 'dialogue', though it does not exhaust dialogue itself. Other subjects related to missionary and anthropological dialogue, such as Orientalism, Colonialism, Subaltern Studies and Vernacular Christianity are discussed in Appendix 1.



Area: 28,236 sq. Km.
Total Population: 14,717,000
Catholics: 21,713
(Catholic Directory of Bangladesh, 1986)

The Khulna Diocese comprises the civil Districts of Khulna, Satkhira, Bagerhat, Kushtia, Chuadanga, Meherpur, Jessore, Jhenaidah, Norail, Magura and part of Faridpur and Gopalgonj.

Dialogue in the field

My first visit to the field (Catholic Diocese of Khulna) in 1982-83, was as a missionary,[4] at a time when mission theology had developed many ideas already present in Vatican II, concerning renewal, inculturation, and adaptation. At the same time, the phenomenon of secularisation that informed western Christianity was reaching the mission field: the crisis of colonialism and neo-colonialism, the emergence of local churches and local theologies, the failure of developmentism and the role of local governments, were putting under pressure a missionary identity which in the past had been oriented, through the idiom of 'saving souls', to imposing Christian western values on others. Khulna Diocese reflected this general disposition for renewal where old and new missionary ideologies were opposing each other. The Rishi, who totalled almost sixty per cent of the Catholic population, were often taken as a testing-ground for the new approach and they were made the object of concern through 'New Paths' of missionary activity. Since 1980 some missionaries have abandoned the parish structure to live among the Hindu Rishi (Chuknagar-Tala) with the purpose of serving them in their needs and sharing life with them, without seeking their conversion. This 'paradox' was inspired by the new idiom of 'dialogue' which was becoming the key-word for a different missionary approach.

If dialogue for some missionaries represents a camouflage of the old idiom of 'saving souls', still centred on conversion, it also announces a move away from this position towards a more open encounter. Furthermore, if dialogue initially concerned the activity of the Church in the so-called 'mission territories', it has now become a widely spread idiom to address religious pluralism in western societies (Barnes 1989; Rizzi 1991). My intention here is not to discuss the relationship between anthropologists and missionaries (cf. Bonsen, Marks, Miedema: 1990) but to assess their common experience of dialogue and encounter with the Other, for both Christianity and anthropology went hand in hand with colonisation and both rest on the same metaphysics.[5]

Fieldwork was conducted between October 1988 and September 1989 and I spent my first period among the Hindu Rishi of the Chuknagar-Tala-Dumuria area, this being also the place of the most recent missionary involvement with the Rishi. Close contact with the missionaries was required in order to establish the impact of their new approach and, at the same time, fieldwork among the Hindu Rishi, the results of which are contained mainly in Part 1, became necessary to illuminate the rest of my fieldwork among the Christian Rishi. Given the Rishis' recent encounter with Christianity, it is vital to address their experience as Hindus and 'Untouchables', and to highlight in particular their

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4 During this period I studied Bengali language and culture at the Oriental Institute, Barisal, and had my first encounter with the Rishi, both Hindu and Christians, and was informed about missionary involvement among them.

5 During the Renaissance "... the fundamental European response to this alien Other lies in the massive and ceaseless task of conversion..." (McGrane 1989:13-14); the other is seen "as a potential Christian.... Only after Christianity comes Anthropology...." (ibid.: 18).

understanding and implementation of 'Hindu *dharma*', in order to understand the real nature of their conversion/aggregation to Christianity, and the continuities and discontinuities between old and new practices. Though returning periodically to Chuknagar, I moved, in fact, to the Baradal Christian community, the most recent (1937) among the Rishi Christians. Successively, I stayed in Satkhira parish where missionary presence was first established in c. 1917 and later in Simulia where the Rishi had been missionised since 1856. I spent the last period in the city of Khulna where the Christian Rishi have moved in great numbers, but the findings of this have been excluded from the present work. The choice to contact more than one Christian community came from a need to research into the varieties of Rishi-missionary dialogue, sacrificing an in-depth analysis of a single community to an overall perception which seems more respectful of both the Rishis' network of interrelations and the spectrum of missionary involvement among them. My territorial movement was soon followed by a journey into the past: in the parishes I gathered historical data in the form of missionary diaries and reports, leading to further research in archives both in Bangladesh and Europe, sufficient to retrace the early history of the Rishi mission which is discussed in Part 2 (1856-1952). The more I read this material, especially since returning from the field, the more I realised that present Rishi-missionary dialogue could only be explained in terms of past dialogues. In retracing the voices of the past I felt a sense of participating in the present dialogue, since both missionaries and Rishi were interested in their (recent) history and compared their own memories and feelings with the written evidence. In the light of this, rather than giving a strict chronology of events, I have sought to use past history to highlight present mission theology and activity, arguing that dialogue, in so far as it became an encounter with the Other, preceded the ideas of Vatican II even though the term was not in use at that time. The final period of the mission history (1952-1990), which concerns the Rishi-Xaverian encounter, is discussed in Part 3, together with the results of fieldwork among the Rishi Christians. In this part also, the history of the three major Rishi communities (Simulia, Satkhira and Baradal) has been traced separately, in order to emphasise the different circumstances in which dialogue evolved.

The presence of a number of missionary institutions among the Rishi until 1952, their open or latent competition, the variable styles of individual missionaries vis-à-vis the Rishi, and the interaction of both missionaries and Rishi with the wider society, generated a multiplicity of dialogues which were most of the time destined to remain frustrated. In the last phase, from 1952 onwards, ambiguities and perplexities have not diminished and, despite a more serious missionary commitment towards the Rishi, the Xaverians feel all the burden of past history and present choices. Furthermore, the tension between an 'ideal dialogue' and the reality in the field must take into account the long years of missionary training in which the Other to be 'converted' is represented, invented, defined and targeted in a monologic fashion. Only the encounter with this Other in the field seems able to destabilise identities and put certainties in question.

Dialogue and missionary ideology

Ten years after the Xaverians entered East Pakistan, the Catholic Church began the celebration of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which was to revolutionise mission theology: a desire for 'dialogue' with cultures and other religious ways was replacing the old 'conversion of the unfaithful'. Furthermore, the missionaries, in daily contact with peoples, their culture and their religion, were themselves very much part of this process and strongly encouraged it to develop. By the end of the seventies, a missionary magazine with contributions from the field, *Fede e Civiltá* (Faith and Civilisation), changed its name to *Missione Oggi* (Mission Today), as if to symbolise the changed reality both in the field and at home. The contributions from the mission presented less a representation of the Other, more a self-presentation of the missionary's role and identity. It is argued here that, if the theoretical basis for missionary 'dialogue' found its ground in the West, it was in the field that this 'dialogue' was tested and became either a camouflage for the same aim as before, i.e. conversions, or a basis for a different kind of encounter with the Other. This second stance gives us the opportunity to analyse not only a change in missionary position, dictated by a different mission theology, but also, at a deeper level, a change of relationship between what we could label the Self of the western missionaries and the Other of Bangladeshi Christians, Hindus and Muslims. Following Levinas, I will suggest that it is the desire to meet this Other in his own 'alterity', to establish a 'dialogue' of life with him, which motivated the Self to go beyond its obstinate search for the 'conversion' of the Other. As a result some missionaries, who understood conversion not as a change of faith but as a change of heart, felt the need to realise their own conversion to the Other. Completely subverting established positions, it is the Other, the Rishi, the poor, the Untouchable, the 'unfaithful', the Tribal, the Hindu, the Muslim.... who asks the missionary to convert himself. Natural disasters such as cyclones, droughts and famines, and political events such as the creation of Pakistan, the War of Liberation of 1971 and the Independence of Bangladesh in 1972, have been important moments for missionaries and Bangladeshis to renegotiate their relationship and to destabilise conventional understandings of 'conversion'. Difficulties and problems of every kind are still a reality in Bangladesh and the missionary cannot close his eyes or shut himself in the mission compound caring only for the local concerns of his minute flock. 'The face of the Other' became a challenge for the missionary and "called his freedom into question": dialogue and encounter have involved much more than relief activity and social development. There has been something more substantial at stake here: the Self and the Other were not fixed and unchangeable, dialogue was not a given or unavoidable, and its internal dynamics included both the said and the unsaid.

Though interested in a localised dialogue, we cannot afford to ignore, apart from the multiplicity of dialogues in which this particular dialogue is embedded, a more general ideology of dialogue which has informed mission activity in recent years. This comes in the form of theological reflection, pursued by individual theologians or different schools of thought, and through official statements by the Church

authorities, always eager to give guidelines and to reconduct into orthodoxy the 'confusion' of different positions and the radicality with which dialogue was being applied; in fact, enthusiasm for the initial Church-World dialogue proposed by Vatican II has generated an often controversial and tense, internal dialogue. With theological reflection discussed in Part 3, as pertinent to new missionary attitudes among the Rishi, I will now concentrate on some recent Vatican documents on inter-religious dialogue.

During the celebration of Vatican II, in 1964, Pope Paul VI set up the 'Secretariat for the Non-Christians', recently renamed the 'Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue'. Following its plenary assembly of 1984, the Secretariat issued a document[6] indicating the principal elements of the Church's mission, seen as a "single but complex and articulated reality", in which dialogue and direct proclamation of the gospel were treated as essential and interrelated components.[7] More recently, in June 1991, the 'Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue' and the 'Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples' issued jointly the document '*Dialogue and Proclamation*',[8] making it clear that dialogue represents an essential but not exclusive aspect of missionary proclamation. When the document was in its final stages, John Paul II published, on December 1990, the Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* , which deals in several paragraphs (§ 55-57) with the issues discussed at length in the document. Despite a more open view on dialogue, only at one stage (§ 4) does '*Dialogue and Proclamation*' recommend that it be interpreted in the light of this encyclical, "partly because the drafters of the encyclical kept it secret" (Scherer - Bevans 1992: 117). Apparently, *Redemptoris Missio* "was not circulated widely prior to its preparation and shows a good deal of polemics against missiological positions viewed negatively by certain Vatican officials" (Ibid.: 177-8). It has been noticed that whilst in the encyclical (§ 46), conversion is defined as "accepting, by a personal decision, the saving sovereignty of Christ and becoming his disciple", in '*Dialogue and Proclamation* ' (§ 11) conversion is "the humble and patient return of the heart to God in the desire to submit one's life more generously to him" (Ibid.)[9] This variety of positions, even within official documents, reflects a greater variety in missionary circles, both at the level of missiological reflection and praxis. Reactions vary from religious relativism, to a commitment for renewal, to a fundamental evangelism where the idiom

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6 "*The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission* ", Secretariat for the Non-Christians, Rome 1984.

7 "The fact that Christian mission can never be separated from love and respect for others is proof for Christians of the place of dialogue within that mission" (1984 Document, § 19).

8 The document required much preparation and numerous revisions, including the approval of the 'Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith'.

9 Scherer and Bevans conclude that : "Whether or not this document becomes, in effect, a refining of the pope's strongly stated ideas, 'Dialogue and Proclamation' represents a significant contribution to the official Catholic thought on the question of the validity of other religious ways in the face of the traditional Christian claim that, outside of Christ, there is 'no other name ... by which we are to be saved' (Acts 4:12)" (Scherer - Bevans 1992: 118).

of 'saving souls' still prevails.[10] It seems that postmodernism has also reached mission reflection and activity, suggesting an abandonment of the five historical 'paradigms' according to which missionary activity has been carried out in the past, in favour of a "postmodern, ecumenical paradigm" (should this be possible!) which takes into account the great historical changes which have modified human and world history during the present century, since "quite literally, we live in a world fundamentally different, from that of the nineteenth century, let alone earlier times" (Bosch 1991: 189).[11] If "Christian mission and evangelization, at the dawn of this postmodern era.... has taken new directions" (Scherer & Bevans 1992: xix), these can best be assessed through the study of localised missions, such as that among the Rishi, where orthodoxy must necessarily become orthopraxis and where the reality of dialogue can be tested.

Dialogue and anthropology

Returning from the field I needed to readjust my perspective to understand 'dialogue' not simply as a restricted phenomenon of mission theology and practice of the last thirty years or so, but as a perception so extensive that it informed western thought, including social anthropology. The initial usage of dialogue in anthropology, however, seemed to be restricted to reproducing the communicative nature of fieldwork in the final presentation of ethnographic texts. As Fabian says "a reification of genre .... may result in the degeneration of critical epistemological diagnosis into literary 'therapy' of ethnography" (Fabian 1990: 762). Indeed, this sort of 'functional dialogue', adopted to solve contingent issues, is destined to repeat the errors of the past, given that it seems centred on self-justification, that the 'fragmented subject' is still in command, and that economic and political power relations tend to be dismissed as irrelevant.

Having reminded us that when dialogue made its appearance during this century it was as part of 'soft existentialism' (Buber) and of 'hard critical theory' (Habermas), Fabian disqualifies its emergence in anthropology:

> Anthropologists began to think seriously about dialogue at a time when, in general usage, the term had reached a low in signification. It acquired a nonspecific ethical bonhomie, oozing good will, apparently lacking any cutting edge that would be required for critical work (Fabian: 1990: 763).

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10 On this score, see Gellner 1992, and his treatment of religious fundamentalism, religious relativism and rationalist fundamentalism.

11 I have limited myself to discussing Roman Catholic mission theology merely because this directly concerns my field of enquiry, but the amount of research and material produced by other Christian denominations is equally considerable and relevant. Scherer and Bevans (1992) present in their overview three main traditions of missiological thought, apart from the Catholic one: the conciliar-ecumenical (World Council of Churches - Commission on World Mission and Evangelism); the Easter Orthodox and the Evangelical missiology (World Evangelical Fellowship).

He points out that dialogue was first introduced "not to signal an ethical attitude.... but to serve as a reflection about the nature of anthropological fieldwork"(ibid.). This was later extended to the dialogical form of ethnographic writing, but without solving a complex epistemological dilemma, given that the crisis of the authoring subject, its representation of reality and its othering role did not originate in anthropology, although anthropology, better than others, epitomised the crisis.

The experience of 'fieldwork' using the technique of 'participant observation' has played an important role in establishing anthropology as a discipline in its own right, but the dialogue conducted in the field did not necessarily modify the anthropologist's dialogue pursued at home, since achievements in the field acquired meaning only when validated by a dialogue at home in terms of the 'ruling' trends of thought (cf. Appadurai 1988a:16-17). This restrictive interpretation of western anthropology can also be applied to the so-called 'native' anthropologist, whose professionalism is exhibited through his dialogue either with the community of anthropologists at home or with anthropologists at large. In both cases, the anthropologist did not set off to the field 'empty-headed' but well equipped with social theories, research strategies and hypotheses to be tested. Even the unexpected findings or 'surprises' that emerged in the course of fieldwork would be diluted or 'adjusted' in order to satisfy the western reader or to fit 'academic requirements'. The very 'language' the anthropologist was asked to produce was necessarily conditioned by the rules of this 'internal dialogue' with the 'near Other' about ' distant Others'.[12]

The postmodern debate which dominates contemporary philosophy and informs contemporary social anthropology, has reacted powerfully against this state of affairs and has taken different directions in an attempt to solve this impasse. A strange situation has evolved in relation to the relevance of dialogue as part of an ideal solution: on the one hand, dialogue, invoked by the post-modernists in order to eliminate authorial hegemony, seems ineffective in exposing other hegemonies;[13] on the other, dialogue appears unable to save anthropology from the present circumstances of a fragmented reality.

Those who deny social anthropology the likelihood of surviving its present crisis are also those who deny the possibility of dialogue in anthropology, and while the 'anthropological present' - "capturing" the other in his time - is exorcised as the actual evil, anthropology is denied a future to redeem itself. There is no doubt that "insofar as 'participant observation' is really interested in observing rather than participating ... it is epistemologically committed to the sovereignty of observation and its monologue about the Other rather than the democracy of genuine participation and

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12 "When anthropologists return to their countries, they must write up 'their people, and they must do so in the conventions of representations already circumscribed (already 'written around', 'bounded') by their discipline, institutional life, and wider society" (Asad 1986: 159).

13 " Those leading the post-modern genre appear relatively indifferent to the material circumstances surrounding their own intellectual production. They have little to say about their locus in the United States and the relation of their academic movement to the country's global economic and political hegemony" (Peace 1990: 28).

its dialogue with the Other" (McGrane 1989: 124). On the other hand, it seems there is no escape for anthropology whose " 'scientific method' is the decay of dialogue, the sustained, cultivated, and epistemologically enforced atrophy of dialogue" (ibid.: 127), given that too much participation spoils the method. Thus, paraphrasing Foucault, as psychiatry has been the West's monologue about madness, so anthropology has been the monologue about the Other (ibid.). When today anthropology has adopted an implicit cultural relativism, this becomes a subtle way for 'redomestication and annihilation of difference', given that anthropology, made strong by its relativist consciousness, "sees how the alien is imprisoned in his cultural absolutism" and superiority over him is re-established. The anthropologist has either to continue his solipsistic play, where "this intercourse or dialogue is a fantasy, a mask, covering over and hiding his analytic monologue or masturbation", or following Castaneda's example, to become a native, and destroy what is left of anthropology (ibid.: 125-26). In similar vein, some missionaries too were reproached by their superiors for 'going too native' among the Rishi and ruining the 'purity' of the message.

Curiously enough, McGrane bases part of his critique of dialogue on Fabian (1983), while the latter, on the contrary, recognises the importance of "continued exploration of the dialogical nature of ethnographic research" (Fabian 1990: 764).

> To preserve the dialogue with our interlocutors, to assure the Other's presence against the distancing devices of anthropological discourse, is to continue conversing with the Other at all levels of writing, not just to reproduce dialogues. In fact, I have gone as far as saying precisely that *if* fieldwork is conducted dialogically, problems with writing will not be resolved by adopting the dialogical form (ibid.: 766).

Moreover, Fabian is opposed to the radical form of 'graphic silence', since "to stop writing about the Other will not bring liberation" (ibid.: 760), but he advocates the position whereby 'not-writing is a moment of writing', in the sense that he dissociates ethnographic data from the process of producing monographs. For this reason he proposes to "transform ethnography into a praxis capable of making the Other present (rather than making representations predicated on the Other's absence)..." (Ibid.: 771).

With this in mind, I propose to extend the discussion to the field of philosophy for two reasons: firstly, social anthropology would benefit from a more extensive understanding of dialogue itself and, secondly, anthropology could contribute to the empirical testing of philosophical hypotheses, given the very concrete nature of its Other. Furthermore, as will become apparent from our case study, the Self does not dictate the rules of dialogue and very often it is the Other who teaches the Self faithfulness to pursue dialogue in spite of misunderstandings and failures. This becomes for the anthropologist an ongoing learning process which destabilises his certainties and decontextualises his foreignness (or exteriority).

For this very reason, writing about dialogue raises a series of problematic issues connected with orality and literacy, conversation and textualization, speech and translation. In order to clarify my own understanding of dialogue, I need firstly to recognise that I am not the main agent (or subject) of the

dialogue I have witnessed in the field between the Rishi and the missionaries. My own dialogue with them is only partial, fleeting and far from exhaustive. Nevertheless, a dialogue observed and witnessed can be taken to include the observer, following Bakhtin's idea of 'inclusion', : "One who does not participate in the dialogue but understands it" (Bakhtin 1990: 125). In addition, it is a parameter for a different level of dialogue which takes place after the field experience, with those who were not present at my "primary dialogue" or the past "primary dialogue" between the Rishi and the missionaries. This "secondary or shadow dialogue", resulting from a 'decontextualization, recontextualization, appropriation' and reversion of the field experience (Crapanzano 1990: 275), is not dissimilar, *mutatis mutandis*, from the dialogue of the missionary at home, when he recalls and represents his dialogue in the field.[14] In these terms, I accept Crapanzano's criticism of Tedlock and other 'dialogical anthropologists' for taking a metaphorical relationship non-metaphorically, for failing to distinguish between the primary and the secondary dialogue, and for "granting the interpreter [anthropologist] what has to be regarded as a superhuman ability to bracket off secondary dialogues and their languages" (Ibid.: 276).

Secondly, I distinguish the oral and literary genres, in which dialogue *per se* is embedded, from a dialogical principle which informs my reading of existence. The application of this dialogical principle overcomes the limitations of a reductionist definition of dialogue, which can be understood not only as a 'conversation', but also as its absence. The period of silence intervening between one period of dialogue and the next is as important as dialogue itself and can be placed within dialogue only when reality is read from the perspective of a dialogical principle. Only in this way can we accept that dialogue, following its etymology, is "... a speech across, between, through two people. It is a passing through and a going apart. There is both a transformational dimension to dialogue and an oppositional one - an agonistic one. It is a relationship of considerable tension" (Crapanzano 1990: 276). The dialogical tension present in dialogue comprehends the many modes of human communication so that what has been seen as distinct from dialogue (at least in anthropological circles), such as the 'monograph',[15] can be reinterpreted as a dialogical product. On the other hand, many pseudo-dialogical writings can be stripped of their pretence of being in dialogue.[16]

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14 "..... A shadow dialogue is one a speaker has - silently, for the most part - with others, embodied say in his colleagues, who are not present at the primary dialogue. The primary dialogue becomes the theme of the shadow dialogue, and the partners in the primary dialogue become figures in this new dialogue that bypasses them" (Crapanzano 1990: 275).

15 "A monograph is ... a writing, a drawing, or a painting alone: a writing that stands alone - as a fatality perhaps. It is pictorical - representational - without inherent tension. ..... [Dialogue] is agonistic, live, dramatic; the other [monograph] is pictorical, static, authoritative. At least since Plato's Phaedrus, the two have been understood in opposition to each other and have been defined as such". (Crapanzano 1990:276)

16 "Textualization is only one realization of a complex of movements from-oral-to-written-to-oral-to-written. It is only a recurrent moment of the *dialogue* rather than its telos and totalization. It is not just a neutral change in the medium of expression, a movement from speech to writing, but is rather the permutation of speaking/writing, writing/speaking. For us, by contrast, the text of a *dialog* is a data base, a record of facts that can be removed from their originating context and put to new uses in other places" (Tyler 1990: 293).

The distinction made by Tyler between 'Renaissance *dialogue*' and the current uses of '*dialog*' in anthropology discloses that in the latter, not only "the role of representation is paramount and the text, as a repository of fact, usurps its oral contexts and undermines their function" (Tyler 1990: 293),[17] but also, it "transforms *dialogue* from *ethos* to *logos*, from ethics to epistemology" (Ibid.: 294). Renaissance *dialogue* in contrast, grounding itself in the *vita contemplativa* rather than in the *vita activa*, "was not evaluated performatively within the scope of an economy of production.... It was an ethos .....", even though it did not give up all epistemic and ontologic claims. Maybe because of these claims, Tyler also sees *dialogue* as "already compromised by the *logos* it comprises, for it is an ontology, the self story of itself, the auto-bio-graphy of the self's auto-nomy, the *selfelectedself*', where the self discovers itself in the Other. This leads to "the voices of the self-discovered Cartesian cogito, the Freudian Narcissus, Lacan's mirrored ego, Sartre's ego-in-the-look-of-the-other, and Piaget's egocentric child...." (Ibid.: 299) But the fragility of this unity is exposed when the Other, like it or not, answers back, to break the mirror of our Self-image, and to force us into crisis, or growth.

Eurocentrism during its long history has delivered to the non-European Other a 'message of salvation', firstly through Christian truths (Renaissance), then the power of reason (Enlightenment), and cultural evolution (nineteenth century), attaining lately a final message in relativism, which continues, however, to represent a new form of superiority over the Other, for only we are aware of it. Nevertheless, even relativism is the result of tensions present within a supposedly unitary European history in relation to its Other, and the idea of a single domineering *logos* does not account for the diverse and often contradictory relation of Europe to its Other.

When anthropology is translated to the realm of dialogue, a multiplicity of dialogues to be sure, anthropological 'knowledge' does not belong to a corpus and is not a personal possession of the individual anthropologist, since this 'knowledge' is subordinate to the Other with whom dialogue is never ended and never ending. This is something more than and something different from cultural relativism, for it does not originate from truth claims. Only when truth is suspended and the Other welcomed is there a chance to discover together the intensity of a project-discipline called *anthropos-logía*, where the *logos* is not the violent *reductio ad unum* of Greek philosophy but takes into account the diversity of positions even within European thought vis-à-vis Otherness,[18] as well as the presence of 'Others' within Europe. This different understanding of a 'weak *logos*' foresees the interpretation of knowledge-learning through suffering (*pathei-mathos*), and is closer to the Levinasian idea of empathy (suffering with), thus "learning the truth of man through the perception of his absence in the Other"

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17 Tyler continues: "This hegemony of the text arises because the text is valued as a reliquary of fact and as an aid to memory rather than as a contemplative object stimulating further discourse realized not just as another supplementary text, but as a continuing *co-lection* of text and talk" (Tyler 1990: 293).

18 For instance, it has been observed that Todorov (1984a) does not practise in relation to those other who were the Europeans of 1500 that respectful dialogue which he pretends from them in their relation with the American Other (Rizzi 1991: 185).

(Rizzi 1991: 202). Perhaps the equation of truth with com-passion opens up new possibilities "to find a reconciliation between the need to evaluate and a desirable will for dialogue" (ibid.: 196).

For this reason, I question the radicality of a post-modern dialogic position, where dialogue is reduced to mere genre, in favour of an ethico-political commitment. In other words, following Harvey's suggestion, I propose " the treatment of different and 'otherness' not as something to be added on to more fundamental Marxist categories (like class and productive forces) but as something that should be omnipresent from the very beginning in every attempt to grasp the dialectics of social change" (Harvey 1989: 355; 1993: 3).

The use of 'dialogue', or better of fictional and apparent dialogues (cf. Murray 1991) in the mission field has a long history in Bengali Christianity. In 1599, the Jesuit Fr. De Souza translated into Bengali a treatise of Christianity confuting the 'errors' of other religions. To this he attached a short catechism written in the form of 'dialogue', but the book has been lost (J. Sarkar 1973:369). Some eighty years later, a Bengali convert, Don Antonio de Rosario, wrote another 'dialogue' between a Christian and a Hindu Brahmin, in order to show the falsity of Hinduism and the truthfulness of Christianity. In the following century, the then superior of the Augustinians in Bengal, Fr. Manoel D'Assumpção, translated Don Antonio's book into Portuguese, its object being to make it easy for the missionaries to hold discussions in the Bengali language with the Hindus.[19] The work was printed in Lisbon in 1743 and gives the Bengali and Portuguese texts in parallel columns (Silva-Rego 1955/XI: 673-4). In 1836, Fr. Guerin, vicar at Chandernagar, published a new edition of this book (Hosten 1914b).

Another related episode was the controversy which originated among the Augustinians in Bengal when, following the visit there in 1712c. of Laynes, the Bishop of Myliapore (Josson 1921/1:109-110), Fr. Jorze da Presentação and Fr. Eugenio Trigueiros were sent to Bengal.[20] While the former "finds difficulty in the fact that his European studies of theology had not properly prepared him for the many situations that confronted him in India" (Hartmann 1978:125), the latter had difficulties collaborating with his Portuguese confrères born in India. These, in fact, used the Portuguese language to teach their native Christians with the result that these Christians would not accept being taught in Bengali.[21] When Trigueiros tried to persuade them to accept the catechism in their native language,

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19 One copy has been kept at the Biblioteca Publica de Evora Ms. C XVI / 1-1 Peça 11.

20 Following Laynes's visit to Bengal, a group of fourteen Augustinians left for India in 1720 and it was most probably Fr. Jorze da Presentação who, in 1748, wrote a report of their voyage and in particular gave an account of his own and Fr. Trigueiros's work in Bengal. This anonymous manuscript, kept in the Biblioteca Publica de Evora, Codice CXV/2-9, is discussed at length by Hartmann (1978).

21 "They call this language 'Portuguez torto', but the Christians of Bengal take much pride in it, so that they would consider it an outrage, were they obliged to learn the catechism in Bengali. They also consider it a great shame to be called Bengali, even though they are such, for they say that only the pagans are Bengalis, and they Portuguese, though yellow or black ones..... From this stems their repugnance to be catechised in Bengali" (Hartmann 1978:196).

many resisted and the clashes over the language question lasted several years. He even wrote some treatises in Bengali but his opponents reported back to Goa that he was teaching in Sanskrit like the Brahmins (Hartmann 1978:196).

These events which pre-date the missionary-Rishi encounter are, nonetheless, useful in situating our enquiry within a broader framework. On the one hand, they contrast with the sources presented by Murray (1991), and on the other, they offer a clear counterpart to the North American Indian-white relations. Murray's study is of great importance to our line of enquiry since it concentrates and analyses in depth many themes that are only touched upon in this thesis. After dealing at great length with problems concerning the translation of the Christian message, stressing the inequality of power and knowledge between cultures and languages, Murray deals with the representation and textualization of Indian speech and speeches, "speaking in a Christian voice" (35). Similar to the Bengali scene, apparent dialogues are created where "the Indians are presented as having an independent voice", but serving the power of the ruling discourse. Moving beyond Foucault who foresees a resistance to power 'in silence rather than discourse' (52), Murray presents the figures of two literate Christian Indians, Occom and Apes, who were highly polemical against the whites but, at the same time, offer 'an olive branch'. Indeed,

> As a way of avoiding what threatens to become the dead ends of theories of closed epistemes and discourses, which are good at explaining how we are locked into systems but offer no way out, the idea of dialogue and even of presence has been seen as having special relevance to those groups denied any specific identity within the dominant discourses.... (Murray 1991:52).

Issues of orality and literacy are further discussed in relation to Indian autobiographies. In spite of being a genre suited to satisfying white sensibilities, autobiographies remain an ambiguous response to white culture, since "... in their bicultural hybrid form ... the different registers of language sometimes combine and sometimes struggle for dominance". In the case of Black Elk, for instance, his genius "lay in organising Lakota religion according to a Christian framework, emphasising characteristics amenable to expression in symbols reminiscent of Christian symbols, yet keeping a Lakota essence" (Kehoe 1989: 69). Another successful, 'civilised' Indian, Eastman, 'becomes an Indian spokesman, increasingly critical of white policies', to the point of questioning the validity of his 'conversion' to Christianity, given that "white society does not embody those values of Christianity for which he has been made to renounce his past" (Murray 1991: 78).

The discussion on *Indian Dialogues*, published by the missionary John Eliot in 1671, becomes an invitation for Murray to conclude his study by concentrating on 'dialogues and dialogics' as a central theme of anthropological debate. If power records other voices to be subjugated, it cannot escape registering a subversive presence in these voices which undermine the discourse of power itself. It may also be true that "we locate as 'subversive' in the past precisely those things that are not subversive to ourselves, that pose no threat to the order by which we live" (Greenblatt 1981: 52), and that "cultural

spaces of possible resistance" (Porter 1988: 767) can be re-absorbed and nullified by the dominant discourse, but this is not the whole answer. Unfortunately Murray's discussion of anthropologists working with the Zuni (Cushing, Ruth Benedict and Tedlock), leads him to equate reflexive with dialogical anthropology (Murray 1991: 134), which results in a most ambiguous position. While on the one hand, he recognises that "dialogical and dialectical approaches... challenge the whole opposing categories of subjective and objective and the rhetorical forms that accompany them" (ibid.:133), on the other, he points "to a very real question about whether dialogue is really an epistemological and methodological as much as a political and moral issue" (ibid.:146). However, given the 'slipperiness of terms like dialogue', the decision must be whether dialogue is "an end in itself or a means to a different end" (ibid.). The example of Cushing, discussed at length by Murray, shows that his 'going native' was only meant to acquire knowledge of the Zuni ('They love me and I learn'). But Cushing's becoming an Indian "ultimately skirts the question of the loss of self" (ibid.:140). This result is to be expected when epistemology and methodology take over the moral and political, which, in my view, are not only the real issues concerning dialogue, but provide the basis for unmasking 'fictive and deceitful dialogues'.

Philosophies of Dialogue

Rather than engaging in a wide-ranging philosophical debate, I will limit this discussion to presenting some suggestions made by Bakhtin, Gadamer and Levinas which will help us to clarify both the Rishi-missionary encounter[22] and anthropological enquiry. Apart from the obvious theme of dialogue, all seem to highlight the need for the Self to assume its responsibilities, to renounce a 'murderous freedom', and to become, in a word, an ethical Self. This 'ethical dialogue', disrupting the *status quo* from its very foundations, addresses questions of power and politics and nullifies the false pretensions of a functional and innocuous dialogue. The implications of ethics vis-à-vis politics and the space they provide for a meaningful anthropological enquiry, will be further reflected upon in my general conclusion.

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22 There is certainly a risk in wanting to found the Rishi-missionary dialogue on dialogical theories, but it should be remembered that many elder missionaries are acquainted with the works of Buber and Marcel and that younger ones are increasingly discovering Bakhtin, Gadamer and Levinas.

Bakhtin

Bakhtin's literary criticism has inspired the work of many anthropologist,[23] one of the latest and most consistent being Mumford (1989). His reading of Bakhtin discloses how 'interpenetrating consciounesses and interacting subjectivities emerge historically' as part of 'unbounded and layered cultures' in which dialogue occurs. His analysis of dialogic process in Asia "illuminates Bakhtin's western example, eroding the outdated boundary between East and West" (ibid.: 20).[24] Reflecting upon the movement from 'inner subjectivity' to 'intersubjectivity', Mumford underlines how "Bakhtin's writings are preoccupied with hierarchy in language styles and the manner in which hegemonic, 'authoritative' utterances situated in a locus of power come to be undermined by counter-hegemonic voices in the periphery.... Hegemonic discourse, having become 'internally persuasive', is later 'laughed out of existence' ...." (ibid.: 15). The Gramscian component of this reading, is very close to a Levinasian move from ethics to politics involving the irruption of *le tiers* in the Same-Other relationship to be discussed later.

Bakhtin's 'philosophical anthropology' is rooted in dialogism, understood as the basis of language, society and the self. For Bakhtin the uniqueness of the self is not an absolute but can exist only dialogically in relation to other selves.[25]

> ".... I achieve self-consciousness, I become myself only by revealing myself to another, through another and with another's help. The most important acts, constitutive of self consciousness, are determined by the relation to another consciousness (a thou). Cutting oneself off, isolating oneself off, those are the basic reasons for the loss of self..." (Bakhtin, M. 1979, quoted in Todorov 1984b: 96).[26]

The Rishi too understand that, as a group, they need the others to achieve self-consciousness and, in their long struggle to be recognised as 'human', they make use of the language and signs of those from whom they seek to extract this recognition. Thus to the Hindu account of their lowly status they oppose a counter-myth (see Appendix 2B). They observe, as best they can, Hindu rites and festivals,

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23 Among them should be mentioned Crapanzano (1980), Dwyer (1982), Tedlock (1983), Basso (1984), Bruner and Gorfain (1984), Rabinow (1977, 1986), Taussig (1987) and Maranhão ed. (1990).

24 On this score, Mumford suggests abandoning Weber's model of western prophetic thinkers who promoted rationalisation and science, in favour of Joseph Needham's model of eastern intercausality.

25 " The self/other dichotomy in Bakhtin does not, as in Romantic philosophy, emphasize the self alone, a radical subjectivity always in danger of shading off into solipsistic extremes. For the same reason the self, as conceived by Bakhtin, is not a presence wherein is lodged the ultimate privilege of the real, the source of sovereign intention and guarantor of unified meaning" (Clark-Holquist 1984: 65).

26 Bakhtin continues: " The very being of man (both internal and external) is a profound communication. To be means to communicate..... To be means to be for the other, and through him, for oneself. Man has no internal sovereign territory; he is all and always on the boundary; looking within himself, he looks in the eyes of the other or through the eyes of the other..... I cannot do without the other; I cannot become myself without the other; I must find myself in the other, finding the other in me (in mutual reflection and perception). Justification cannot be justification of oneself, confession cannot be confession of oneself. I receive my name from the other, and this name exists for the other (to name oneself is to engage in usurpation). Self love is equally impossible" (Ibid.).

though often in a spirit of 'carnival', and they are served by 'Brahman' priests. They make repeated efforts to abandon their profitable occupation of skinning which renders them 'dirty' in the eyes of other *jatis*. Thus they seek to pass from being no-body, no-person, no-other to be somebody, a person and an 'other' (Thou).

The Rishi are continually conditioned by an other-ascribed identity, which is in conflict with how they would wish to perceive themselves, causing a sort of individual and collective schizophrenia. As non-Muslims, non-accepted Hindus, it is difficult for them, as well as for other minority groups, to be Bangladeshis. Furthermore, the Muslim majority, at least on a mass level, has seen its identity repeatedly imposed from above by those who need to justify monologism under the hegemony of a unified national Islamic identity. This results in the alienation of those who do not belong to this majority, for Islamization of the country has been conceived as the means to create a unique national consciousness, with no place for plurality of consciounesses at any level.

One response to their isolation has been the creation of *Thare* or *Thar Basa* (Rishi language). *Thare* is a corruption of Bengali, in which Bengali words and sounds are used with a different meaning and often combined with a 'sign language'. Not being listened to, both on a ritual and everyday speech level, the Rishi felt the need to create a language by which they could communicate excluding the others, in the way they had previously been excluded, establishing thus unity and community at least among themselves. In a more Bakhtinian spirit we could say that

> .... If my "I" is so ineluctably a product of the particular values dominating my community at the particular point in its history when I coexist with it, the question must arise, "Where is there any space, and what would the time be like, in which I might define myself against an otherness that is other from that which has been 'given' to me?"[27]

One space found by the Rishi is at the very heart of dialogue and communication, i.e. language. In this sense they are close to other minority groups in Bangladesh who struggle to keep their language and themselves alive. They represent the 'centrifugal forces' not as opposed to, but as coexistent with the 'centripetal force', as long as coexistence is possible and accepted.[28]

Another space, of course, is provided by Christianity. The peculiar situation of the Rishi who 'converted', which cannot be explained only in terms of 'indigence' (since, were this the case, many more would have converted), can be explained in dialogic terms as the acquisition of a self-consciousness stemming from the Rishis' aspiration to be treated as 'others', as persons. If, on the one

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27 "Since Bakhtin places so much emphasis on otherness, and on otherness defined precisely as other values, community plays an enormous role in his thought. Dialogism is, among other things, an exercise in social theory....." (Holquist 1990: 38).

28 "Heterology is, in one way, natural to society; it arises spontaneously from social diversity. But just as the latter is constrained by the rules imposed by the single State, the diversity of discourses is fought against by the aspiration, correlative to all power, to institute a common language (or rather a speech)" (Todorov 1984b: 57).

hand, their hope has been partially fulfilled, on the other, they still struggle to achieve an integration with the human community at large. The division within the group, between those who converted and those who did not, betrays a deeper inherent division: either to be accepted as persons renouncing the totality of the community, or to stay and struggle from within the Hindu Rishi community, waiting to be recognised as 'persons'. Furthermore, the partial realisation of the Christian Rishis' aspiration is doubly endangered: not only are they not recognised as part of the whole community, since as soon as their Rishi origin is disclosed they will be labelled '*Muchi Khristan*', but they are also discriminated against within the Catholic community as '*Nuton Khristan*' (newly converted Christians), with all the implications that this sarcasm entails. Nevertheless, their capacity to patiently establish dialogue even at this level is reaping its rewards. The number of priests belonging to the group is growing and the self-confidence this has engendered raises the possibility that in the near future a Rishi might guide the community as bishop, without having to depend on the 'old Catholics' of Dhaka.

The missionaries' attitude towards the Rishi has held, and still holds, a variety of positions ranging from total indifference or opposition, to a complete dedication to their cause. From the early history of this mission up to the present, some missionaries opposed pastoral activity among the Rishi either because they decided *a priori* that it would be better to care for other groups (Namasudra, Tribals), or because they did not consider as viable the project of a Rishi Christian community. Only a few missionaries endured a long period of residence among them, securing the continuity of a dialogue between the two groups. While in the past, however, the choice lay between staying with the Rishi in Khulna or moving elsewhere, now the conflict is developing around the Rishi group: whether to stay with those who are already Christians (Parishes), or focus on the Hindu Rishi. This second alternative, which is, in principle, accepted as a normal procedure of missionary activity, motivated in terms of new conversions, is in conflict with the need to keep and foster the existing Rishi Christian communities. The conflict is further accentuated if we consider five different positions - broadly speaking - existing among the missionaries and the local Church authority in relation to a commitment to the Hindu Rishi: 1) some want as many Rishi as possible to be converted, as soon as possible; 2) for others, conversion, Christian formation and social uplift of the Rishi must proceed at the same pace; 3) others again, who represent a majority of the missionaries committed to the Rishi, would postpone conversion for an indeterminate period of time,[29] concentrating first on the human and social uplift of the group (possibly integrated with the work for other minorities); 4) lately (1991), one missionary has started to re-visit the old Rishi villages contacted in the past by the missionaries, with

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29 It seems that a period of catechumenate would last long enough to ensure a mature and steadfast decision from the candidates, and would also represent a personal rather then a collective (families or groups) option. This position clearly stresses the processual character of a possible adhesion to Christianity and 'conversion' is conceived more as a 'movement' than as a static achievement.

the purpose of establishing a relationship not based on Rishi material gain;[30] 5) a minority of missionaries who do not consider it necessary (and on the contrary, feel it may be detrimental) for the Rishi to convert to Christianity, since this alienates them still further from their group, creating another 'caste within the caste', as well as from their fellow countrymen, since once converted they belong to a Church which tends to consider itself, not ideologically but practically, as foreign. Nevertheless, this last category of missionaries would still remain among the Rishi working for their social and human uplift. This option is based, among other things, on a theological interpretation of 'conversion' understood more as a gift from God than as human effort. According to this view, real 'conversion' is not conceived as a change of identity which involves passing from one group to another, but as an inner reality which subsequently will also ensure a change in infrastructures and society. As a result, a difference is postulated between 'Christianization' of the Rishi, intended as the announcement of Christian values exemplified by the missionaries' presence and, on the other hand, adherence to the Church, which is seen more as an aggregation to a foreign body, a 'romanization'.

In terms of a Bakhtinian dialogic understanding, the first two positions clearly represent a monologic choice on the missionaries' part, since they are interested only in the absorption of the 'other' and in the creation of a single 'transcendental' consciousness. Despite the recognition of a 'theology of dialogue', its practice in some 'mission territories' seems at the least to be incomplete, not because it is not part of pastoral planning, but because it is rooted in a Church-centred, and thus self-centred, theology.

The 'theological' bases from which Bakhtin moves on to affirm dialogism,[31] are not very dissimilar from those invoked by Catholic theology to support interreligious dialogue. Despite the many labels attached to Bakhtin's thought which has received a variety of interpretations (cf. Morson & Emerson 1990), he does not cease inspiring new reflections, including theological ones (Lindsey 1993).[32] Furthermore, the idea of *kenosis*, so vital in the Bakhtinian search for integration of spirituality and corporeality, is what motivated in recent years a missionary shift from an interest in 'saving souls' to an interest in the totality of the human being, providing thus a theoretical justification ('evangelization') for the commitment of the Church in those areas normally considered as belonging to so-called 'Christian charity'. *Kenosis* also provided support for the 'incarnation theory' in missionary activity, according to which the transmission of the Christian message has to be realised by means of

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30 This experiment ended in December 1993 when the missionary who started it was appointed Parish priest in Bhabarpara, in the northern area of the Diocese.

31 It must be remembered that "even before reaching the university, Bakhtin was formidably well read, particularly in the area of speculative theology" (Clark-Holquist 1984: 27).

32 Lindsey's interest in Bakhtin "derives from a current debate among American Catholic theologians concerning the church's competence to make public ethical statements about matters such as the economic order or the nuclear arms race" (Lindsey 1993: 312-13).

'acculturation'. By this is intended not only the appropriation of cultural local values into Christianity, but also the personal commitment of the missionary to 'incarnate' him or herself in a given situation. All this, however, is not sufficient to guarantee a perception of the other free from the intention of assimilating the other to the self. The certainty of possessing the truth, and the logic of dispensing this truth to others, is what in the past caused, and to some extent still causes, the proclamation of Christianity in monologic terms. Nevertheless, the multiplicity of missionary positions reveals that monologism is no longer the only option in missionary activity. The third and fourth positions presented above, exemplify a clear transitional phase towards the fifth position which represents a totally different approach in mission policy, closer to a Bakhtinian understanding of existence as co-being.

If Bakhtin's intuition motivates a postmodern trend, given that " traditions can no longer be grasped within finalized boundaries [and].... the unbounded self and the unfinished culture emerge as an identity of betweenness..." (Mumford 1989: 17), it does not, however, favour quietism in front of oppression and exploitation. If history is unfinished, it is because those at the periphery have been excluded, and inclusion does not seem to be a priority of liberal pluralism, which, like it or not, is a pupil of Judeo-Christian tradition.[33] Certainly the missionaries who had most impact on the Rishi are those, both past and present, who had the capacity to listen to the Rishis' utterance (*Amrao je manus*!) and to develop with them the meaning of what they uttered in accordance with the contribution of their listeners. To them, the Rishi made the gift of teaching their *Thare* language as a sign of belonging to one and the same community.

Gadamer

The contribution of Gadamer to our dialogue springs from his need to revindicate the originality of dialogue and orality as a solid foundation for hermeneutics, understood by him as a 'conversation with the text', where the method of question and answer[34] reveals "the knowledge of not knowing" (Gadamer 1975: 325), real learning is reached through suffering (*pathei mathos*), experience becomes experience of human finitude, and thus open to other experiences, and thinking is 'being able to go on asking questions' (Ibid.: 330), for "asking it opens up possibilities of meaning" (Ibid.: 341). In this sense, Gadamer's discussion can serve as a challenge to both Rishi-missionary dialogue and anthropological research.

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33 Cf. McGrane 1989: 14-20 ('The Other as potential Christian') and 43-68 ('The Other in the Enlightenment').

34 "... Thus that which is handed down in literary form is brought back out of the alienation in which it finds itself and into the living presence of conversation, whose fundamental procedure is always question and answer" (Gadamer 1975: 331).

If we consider the importance of questioning in anthropology, primarily in the field, but also in the writing and reading of ethnography, we discover a close relation between Gadamer's hermeneutics and the 'primary dialogue' which takes place in the field. For, since hermeneutics has its roots in the 'I-Thou' relationship, and finds an explanation of understanding in the dialogue with the Other, so does an enquiring anthropology, which accepts the finitude of the Self-Other conversation as "infinite openness ... from the conversation that we ourselves are" (Gadamer 1975: 340).

> ...To reach an understanding with one's partner in a dialogue is not merely a matter of total self expression and the successful assertion of one's own point of view, but a transformation into a communion, in which we do not remain what we were (Gadamer 1975: 341, emphasis added).

The 'transformation' which occurs in the participants of a dialogue, the novelty of conversation, is marked, according to Gadamer, "in situations in which understanding is disrupted or made difficult". The mutuality of understanding in conversation is thus compared to the work of the translator[35] in his attempt "to bridge the gap between languages". In this sense he attains a 'fusion of horizons': "the full realization of conversation, in which something is expressed that is not only mine or my author's, but common"(Thompson 1981: 349). His discussion is particularly informative if we compare what has been said in anthropology under 'Cultural Translation'(Asad 1986: 159), with the situation analysed in our study, where we can distinguish between different levels of 'translation' which occurred in the Rishi-missionary dialogue.

a) The most evident 'translation' in our case study is that carried out by the missionaries who from their language translate the Christian message into the language of the Rishi, which is Bengali plus something else (Rishi 'cosmology'). We can note here that the way of translating follows not only the original language of the missionaries in question (Italians and Belgians), but also their 'traditions', often informed by their regional background (and 'prejudices'). Furthermore, there is always the 'personal touch' of individual missionaries, and even though the message's 'main core' remains the same, the implementation differs, since the understanding of it also differs.

b) There is an 'interpretation' of the message by missionary collaborators, such as catechists, teachers and Rishi leaders, who appropriate the message adding their own particular way of implementing it. Lately this has been elaborated and expanded by the presence of local priests, both Rishi and non-Rishi, with further interpretations.[36]

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35 Wanting to avoid the later Wittgenstein's a-theoretical pluralism, Habermas, Apel and Wellmer turn to this contribution of Gadamer: "By focusing on the phenomenon of translation, Gadamer transcends the monadic isolation of language-games and brings to consciousness the inherent reflexivity of ordinary language" (Thompson 1981: 81).

36 Even here we can still speak of 'translation' since Christianity, certainly in the area we are concerned with, and in many others of Bangladesh, is a relatively new religion. Furthermore, most of the bibliography used for the training of local priests is still presented in foreign languages.

At both levels of 'translation' and 'interpretation' not only are there issues concerning understanding and communication, which do not escape power-relations, but also issues associated with 'transformation'. If we take for instance the word '*dharma*', used by the missionaries to translate 'religion', we can see how this word has significantly changed for the Rishi who converted to Christianity and who now associate it with '*Khristan dharma*'. The transformation, however, is by no means uni-directional, since for the missionaries too, 'religion', being reinterpreted according to their own experience within the Rishi community and in daily contact with Muslims and Hindus, has undergone a remarkable and critical change. I certainly would not label this common transformation as a 'communion', since it is difficult to separate activity from individual intentionality, but I would agree with Gadamer that this "reveals something which henceforth exists" and that "we do not remain what we were". The examples of prolonged missionary presence among the Hindu Rishi, and the effort to promote their integration within a wider society, the attempts of many Muslims, Hindus and Christians to pray and work together for the welfare of the entire community, are just a few visible signs that this transformation, in spite of the many and more belligerent 'fundamentalisms', is, at least, feasible.

c) Given the changed and changing missionary view on 'religion', there is a re-translation of the message by the missionaries upon return to their home countries. Far from retaining the same qualities, this message takes on a new perception and interpretation. The encounter with the Other has certainly modified the original message, and even though, strictly speaking, the 'Dogmas of the Faith' have not changed, the way of understanding and implementing them has certainly been transformed. This feed-back, which re-establishes the old and new tension between the universality of the Christian message and the particular-local-vernacular way in which it is carried out, reveals not only an external change in missionary policy, but affects missionary identity as well. The choice of some missionaries, back home, to share their life with poor rural communities or with the people of inner-city slums, and their sensitivity towards 'relevant Others' such as the 'foreigners' and refugees in their own countries, demonstrates, if not a complete change of identity, at least a change of viewpoint destined to challenge the passivity or aggressiveness of western Christian communities; missionary 'charisma', as a theological locus, is not restricted geographically to Third World countries, but is applied to wherever they find themselves.

4) Very similar to this last instance of 'translation', even though the aims and content are different, is the 'translation' conducted by the ethnographer. In this case the anthropologist does not carry a particular message nor is the aim to 'convince' others to adhere to it, but, nevertheless, s/he still has a set of ideas and values ('tradition' and 'prejudices') with which the Other is approached. Moreover, there is, above all, the need for the anthropologist to 'translate' the message of the Other for his/her audience. Fabian's suggestion of 'non-writing as part of writing' and his replacement of 'representation' by 'praxis' "... as transformation in the conditions of relations with the Other ..."

(Fabian 1990: 755) seem pertinent here: "Praxis ... is not as such a remedy for what is wrong in our relations with the Other. It helps to create conditions for othering - recognition of the Other that is not limited to representation of the Other" (ibid.: 771). If the encounter with the Other has not minimally changed, refined, or questioned the ideas and values with which the anthropologist initially set off for the field, it is apparent that the Other has been used to prove ideas, values and theories, as a mirror for the Self. When the Other is 'made present rather than represented' (Fabian), or when his 'proximity' is not nullified (Levinas), the 'inequality of languages' (Asad 1986: 159), which still persists, is certainly diminished, and the "authoritative textual representations" are in consequence reshuffled. The difference between the linguist and the anthropologist, as advocated by Asad, cannot be relegated to the area of 'implicit or unconscious meanings' presumed to be present in a cultural context.[37] Even though the final result of the ethnographer's 'translation' "is inevitably a textual construct", it does not necessarily follow that "as representation it cannot normally be contested by the people to whom it is attributed", or that the "social authority of [an] ethnography" cannot be challenged. Given that "the failure of dialogue figured as a genetic failure in the other, rather than a problem of cultural difference" (Cheyfitz 1989:352), inequality must be addressed at a deeper level.

The difference between linguist as translator and ethnographer appears to be minimal, according to Gadamer, when both see themselves as 'interpreters' of a given 'text'. From what has been noted, Gadamer finds a strong resemblance between the interpretation of written texts and oral conversation; I would, however, prefer to distinguish the oral and the textual, following Levinas's face-to-face encounter with the Other. It is at this level that the anthropologist differs from the linguist; it is here that anthropology can offer to other disciplines a singular and original contribution, claiming the face-to-face encounter with the Other as its primary way of approaching Otherness. This Other is encountered and read as an 'open text' (in a Gadamerian sense), which can only be partially described/translated in a final ethnographic product. The 'textualization' of the Other as the final product of an ethnography, can never be a 'de-finition', in the sense that, encountering the Other and in dialogue with him, ethnography recognises its limitations and shortcomings, its historical finitude, its 'effective-historical consciousness', which takes into account "our many anthropological pasts" (Appadurai 1988a:16).

Critiques of Gadamer's hermeneutics of dialogue have been many and varied: concepts such as community, tradition and prejudices are, for instance, " too monolithic, too stable.... to provide a subtle enough basis for understanding the complex plays of power and desire in the production and reproduction, the representation and interpretation of dialogues" (Crapanzano 1990: 289-90), and the philological reasons which motivate this hermeneutics seem in the end to prevail over dialogue itself

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37 ".....[T]he attribution of implicit meanings to an alien practice *regardless of whether they are acknowledged by its agents* is a characteristic form of theological exercise, with an ancient history" (Asad 1986:161).

(Crowell 1990: 342). While Habermas "criticises Gadamer's tendency to convert this historical insight ['Language is only as handed down'] into an absolutization of cultural tradition",[38] Ricoeur argues that "the ontology which forms the horizon of hermeneutics is not an independent one, but is bound to the methods of interpretation through which it is disclosed" (Thompson 1981: 57).[39] Furthermore, the ontological optimism with which Gadamer legitimates truth-claims for his hermeneutics of dialogue, both in text and orality, gives rise to the criticisms of Derrida who represents "the opposite movement of an ontological scepticism grounded in an explicit claim for the 'textuality' of dialogue" (Crowell 1990: 340).

The concern of both Gadamer and Derrida with understanding, meaning and truth, and their eagerness to leave the once secure grounds of metaphysics, puts them at the forefront of current philosophical discussion (Dallmayr 1989: 75-76). Their "improbable debate" (cf. Michelfelder-Palmer 1989) presents a challenge to metaphysics as well as to other interpretive disciplines, including the social sciences, since both question the metaphysical assumption that "language is at our disposal", and both 'hermeneutics and deconstruction' typify in different ways 'Socratic vigilance' and anti-foundational thinking (Risser 1989: 183-85). Gadamer, wanting to preserve the 'unity of meaning' through the 'good will' of the participants in a dialogue, sees language as the living word of conversation. For Derrida instead, the spoken word is seen as a 'disrupted sign', and reading does not point to dialogue but towards other readings since "the horizon of a text is another text", not derived from an extratextual *Sache* (issue), but from an intertextual dissemination of the sign (Crowell 1990: 351). The "good will" of the participants in dialogue proposed by Gadamer as a prerequisite for a dialogue to proceed, is attacked by Derrida as preeminently logocentric since it presupposes "an already existing commonality in the conditions of understanding" (Simon 1989: 172) which is beyond the power of the will. On this point Dallmayer observes:

> Gadamer's hermeneutics encourage us to venture forth and seek to comprehend alien cultures and life-worlds; however, the question remains whether, in this venture, cultural differences are not simply assimilated or absorbed into the understanding mind (which is basically a Western mind). On the other hand, by stressing rupture and radical otherness Derrida seeks to uproot and dislodge the inquirer's self-identity; yet, his insistence on incommensurability and non-understanding tends to encourage reciprocal cultural disengagement and hence non-learning (Dallmayr 1989: 91-2).

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38 "As Habermas insists: 'Language is also a medium of domination and social force. It serves to legitimate relations of organised power. Insofar as the legitimations of power relations, whose institutionalizations they make possible, are not articulated, insofar as these only express themselves in the legitimations, language is also ideological' " (Thompson 1981: 82).

39 Thus, in contrast to Gadamer, Ricoeur proposes ".... to keep in contact with the disciplines which seek to practise interpretation in a methodical manner, and [to] resist the temptation to separate truth, characteristic of understanding, from the method put into operation by disciplines which have sprung from exegesis" (Ricoeur 1974:11).

Crowell, sharing these concerns, sees in the "neglected orality" of dialogue of both Gadamer and his critics a reason to propose a return to ethics.[40] According to him, Gadamer's focus on the ontological structure of dialogue prevents the latter from seeing "the ethically irreducible meaning of the face-to-face dimension of spoken dialogue". Thus, "in facing the Other, dialogue is our condition for a mutuality that in its asymmetry [as opposed to the 'textualist moment of symmetry'] eludes ontology" (Crowell 1990: 354).

The ethical necessity of dialogue, stressed by some authors or commentators on the Gadamer/Derrida encounter, is taken to its furthest limit by Crowell. The Other for him is "the one who makes a claim on me prior to the assertion of truth claims.... who challenges my self-sufficiency and thus is encountered 'above' me - not as partner but as teacher. Such is the ethical (not ontological) asymmetry that distinguishes dialogue from the 'rhetorical strategies' that rest on it, and so also from the texts with which it may be confused" (Crowell 1990: 354). Crowell is here appealing to Levinas's insights and suggests adopting his perspective in anthropology.[41]

Levinas

To challenge the untenable position of a totalizing, knowing subject - for it is upon the nature of knowledge that the Self founds its claims to truth - Levinas proposes a reflection upon a 'fundamental event', which is prior to all knowledge: the Face of the Other. This 'event' "does not have any systematic character. It is a notion through which man comes to me via a human act different from knowing" (Levinas 1988: 171). The face of the Other is not a representation, it is not a given of knowledge, but it is an authority, which, paradoxically, originates not from 'force' but, on the contrary, from extreme frailty and destitution. It is in its nakedness and vulnerability that the face demands and commands: "Thou shalt not kill". This 'unspoken message' is prior to every *a priori* condition for cognition and becomes an obligation to the Other, a responsibility. With this move, Levinas displaces the first claim of ontology, exemplified in the '*conatus essendi* ' or the effort to exist, where existence is the supreme law. Thus the command

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40 "Since both Gadamer and his deconstructive critics proceed by minimizing the importance of orality in dialogue, subordinating it to an ontological conception of meaning (and of language) that plays itself out indifferently in spoken and written discursive contexts, it may be that this neglected "orality" involves more than what can be prescribed by its ontological significance" (Crowell 1990: 353).

41 "... By re-making the foundation of dialogue in this 'ethical' way Levinas develops a view that has more affinities with the anthropologist's hermeneutical situation than with the philologist's. Since Gadamer's problem was particularly that of 'historical distance' (historicism), he could conceive of dialogical interpretation as being mediated by that 'tradition' shared by both the text and its interpreter. The I-Thou relation was seen as supported by a tradition -however open- to which both belonged. For the anthropologist struggling with 'cultural distance' such an assumption is not always available. On Levinas' view, however, this ethnographic situation of confronting the radically (culturally) 'other' only makes explicit the foundation of all dialogue: 'the strangeness of the other, his very freedom'..." (Crowell 1990: 357).

> ... 'thou shalt not kill' emerges as a limitation of the *conatus essendi*. It is not a rational limit, but a moral ethical term. It is not force but authority. It is a paradox. Both authority and morality are paradoxes... (Levinas 1988: 176).

It is the idea of dissymmetry, however, which destabilises the idea of equality present in the *conatus essendi* (perseverance in being) : "..... In the ethical act, in my relationship to the other, if one forgets that I am guiltier than the others, justice itself will not be able to last" (Ibid.). Equality is put in question by this dissymmetry, since, looking at the destitute face of the other, I discover that his life is more important than my own, and that "the Other is always closer to God than I" (Blanchot 1986: 45). As Levinas says of himself: "I am trying to work against the identification of the divine with unification or totality. Man's relationship with the other is better as difference than as unity: sociality is better than fusion. The very value of love is the impossibility of reducing the other to myself, of coinciding into sameness...." (Levinas-Kearney 1986: 22). If missionary activity is challenged by this statement, so is anthropology and its critics when they rest their theories on 'knowledge and truth', which are only a camouflage to 'kill' the other. For "the ethical 'thou shalt not' dominates the economic and political 'I can'. The 'I can' and the philosophies of 'I can' are no less egocentric than the philosophies of 'I think', notwithstanding that the ego is correlated with an other" (Blanchot 1986: 45).

If Levinas's thought "can make us tremble", it is also because "the complicity of theoretical objectivity and mystical communion will be Levinas's true target" (Derrida 1978: 82/87). Levinas's move to destroy neither God nor the self, but their indiscriminate power, leaves him in a position both of fragility and authority. This authority, however, "lies equally ... in the absence of power, in the way it calls, commands, demands an ethical response" (Wood 1988: 2). This "fragile writing", while it enters and deploys "the logocentric language of philosophy, which constantly threatens his project," is able to disturb the self of Western thought, questioning it about its others. For Levinas, God, language, the self, "being, appearance, subjectivity, and time are all topics about which disagreement is far from trivial" (Smith 1986: 66-7).

Repeatedly Levinas reminds us of the "totalitarian tendencies inherent in all of Western philosophy - primacy of the ego and the reduction of everything to the same", which were also at the basis of (Western) missionary theology and activity, characterised by transmission of truths/dogmas, imposition of new sets of values, and transformation/conversion of the Other. Contrary to this, Levinas proposes not just a subject but a responsible subject who welcomes the other, not as a threat to my freedom "before which I shrivel" (Sartre), but as the one who teaches me to be myself in spite of myself. Thus "the awakening to responsibility is an exaltation of singularity, a deepening of interiority, a surplus of consciousness...." (De Boer 1986: 110). The ethnocentric message of missionary enterprise had to come to terms with the continuous exposure to the Other, and this Other was to break through the subtle but defiant aggressiveness of the missionary.

There is undoubtedly a paradox in recent missionary intentionality which, first setting out to convert, then renounces the *raison d'être* of its vocation - a move which finds its parallel in Levinas's "Paradox of Morality". Moreover, not only does Levinas corroborate the paradox of those missionaries who dispute 'conversion', but he also challenges the position of those who advocate 'conversion of the Other' in the name of their own God,[42] challenging at the same time the Aristotelian and scholastic definitions of God (*Ipsum Esse Substinence* or *Ens Causa Sui*) which informed mission theology and practice. Levinas opposes to this a God who "reveals himself as a trace, not as an ontological presence".[43] 'To believe' or 'not to believe' belongs to the 'Greek language of intelligibility'. It means to prove, to give evidence, to fight for the truth, and while fighting the Other is destroyed. The ethical or biblical perspective transcends this language "as a theme of justice and concern for the other as other, as a theme of love and desire, which carries us beyond the infinite being of the world as presence....." (Levinas-Kearney 1986: 20). God, for Levinas, 'is the commandment of Love', and, like the face, is beyond being and comprehension.[44] Indeed, some missionaries have accepted undergoing a process of "conversion to the Other" or, at least, they present 'conversion' as a process of "mutual *metanoia*" in which they include themselves.[45] As in Levinas's ethical conversion, entailing a *kenosis*, a haemorrhage of the self, and a "turning of our nature inside out", missionary self-conversion is never complete, since it does not take place in the region of consciousness, unconsciousness or being, but "is an emptying of my consciousness, a *kenosis* commanded by the ethical word of the other which inflicts a wound that never heals" (Llewelyn 1988: 144; cf. Levinas 1969: 197; Levinas 1981: 126). As a result, some missionaries have realised that "the enemy of the Christian poor is not the humble Muslim, but the one who is above them both and can abuse religious power to suppress every attempt to denounce facts and suffocate every desire for liberation" (Rigali 1990: 9). This commitment to alterity is very close to a Levinasian understanding of 'justice'[46] and the need to "deploy the language of metaphysics" in order to obtain justice.[47]

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42 " The word of God speaks through the glory of the face and calls for an ethical conversion, or reversal of our nature. .... The moral priority of the other over myself could not come to be if it were not motivated by something beyond nature. The ethical situation is a human situation, beyond human nature, in which the idea of God comes to mind... In this respect, we could say that God is the other who turns our nature inside out, who calls our ontological will-to-be [*conatus essendi*] into question. . . God does indeed go against nature, for He is not of this world. God is other than being" (Levinas-Kearney 1986: 25, emphasis added).

43 "The God of the Bible cannot be defined or proved by means of logical predictions and attributions. Even the superlatives of wisdom, power, and causality advanced by medieval ontology are inadequate to the absolute otherness of God. The God of ethical philosophy is not God the almighty being of creation, but the persecuted God of the prophets [the Suffering Servant] who is always in relation with man and whose difference from man is never indifference" (Levinas-Kearney 1986: 32).

44 "God, as the God of alterity and transcendence, can only be understood in terms of that interhuman dimension which, to be sure, emerges in the phenomenological - ontological perspective of the intelligible world, but which cuts through and perforates the totality of presence and points towards the absolutely other...." (Ibid.: 20).

45 "When a missionary fails to transform himself in relation to the transformation of the other, communication evaporates and there is merely an exchange of words..." (Burridge 1978: 20).

46 "Justice is the way in which I respond to the face that I am not alone in the world with the other.... Justice is not the last word... we seek a better justice.. there is a violence in justice... there is a place for charity after justice" (Levinas 1988: 174-5).

In this brief excursion into philosophies of dialogue, it is Levinas's approach that I have found most relevant to the Rishi-missionary encounter and his thought is frequently addressed in the main body of the thesis. Furthermore, he also inspires, together with Gramsci, my reflections on Orientalism and Subaltern Studies contained in Appendix 1, and the final conclusion. As previously stated, two other issues are discussed in Appendix 1: Colonialism, as closely related to both anthropology and mission activity, and Vernacular Christianity. Under this general heading it is argued that the West is losing its monopoly over Christianity, which is being increasing re-interpreted and adjusted to fulfil the expectations of other cultural settings.

The 'topoi' of multiple dialogues

A study of vernacular Rishi Christianity must take into account the complex environment in which the Rishi experience being Christians: thus, their Hindu background, their Untouchability, their relationship with the Hindu Rishi, with other Hindus and with the Muslim majority, their association with other local Christians and with the foreign missionaries, are all important elements of a composite mosaic which enter into their choices as Christians. The ability and shrewdness of the Hindu Rishi to establish a dialogue/negotiation with society in order to affirm their identity and dignity, are transposed by the Christians in the new environment and, despite ambiguities and perplexities which paralyse both Hindu and Christian Rishi, their perseverance has enabled them to achieve some results.

This multiplicity of dialogues can be further analysed from the perspective of 'place' in addition to that of 'voice', for "the problem of voice ('speaking for' and 'speaking to') intersects with the problem of place (speaking 'from', and speaking 'of')" (Appadurai 1988a:17). The displacement imposed on the Rishi by their status as 'Untouchables', is contrasted with the voluntary displacement of the missionary (and the anthropologist). Thus, "the circumstantial encounter of the voluntarily displaced anthropologist and the involuntarily localized 'other' " (ibid.:16), is marked by the former's power to 'locate and locute'. The Rishi, indeed, appear as framed in a double displacement, firstly by their society and secondly by those who "bound [them] ... to the circumstanciality of place" (Appadurai 1988b:38). The recurrent contrast between centres of production and peripheries of imposed images in recent anthropological literature seem to pay much attention to the power of 'voices' coming from the centres disregarding the potentiality of peripheral voices. For this reason, "the dialogical situation becomes far more complicated - more productive of selves in the encounter" (Crapanzano 1991:442),

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47 "We inhabit an ontological world of technological mastery and political self-preservation. Indeed, without these political and technological structures of organization we would not be able to feed mankind. This is the great paradox of human existence: we must use the ontological for the sake of the other; to ensure the survival of the other we must resort to the technico-political systems of means and ends" (Levinas- Kearney 1986: 28).

given that these selves are not fixed in time and space. In fact, to the real and physical place occupied by the Rishi (both in society and that ascribed to them by the ethnographer) there is also an 'imagined place', which is not only imagined by others (other *jatis*, the missionary, the anthropologist...), but by the Rishi themselves. It is at this stage that, moving from location to locution, the Rishi negotiate and re-negotiate their placement and dis-placement. This is shown in their ability to ignore missionary discourse, to re-interpret it to their own advantage and to make use of those means, such as trials (*bicar*), to impose their reading of events.

Although some missionaries, as we have seen, accept a further displacement vis-à-vis the Church structure and discourse, this is not enough to guarantee an egalitarian dialogue with the Rishi, since missionaries still retain the power to place themselves where they like, while this is denied to the Rishi. However, missionary choice made at the nodality of the Rishis' social life, creates peripheralness for the missionaries, which results in a new nodality for missionary identity (Soja 1989:149). The Rishi, in turn, take advantage of missionary involvement at the periphery without renouncing the advantages of those Christians who are at the centre of missionary attention. In either case, and although much depends on the 'good will' (intentionality) of the missionaries at the periphery, the Rishis' capability to engage in a fruitful negotiation results from their multi-peripheral position which is able to destabilise the centre, with dialogue creating tension rather than mere agreement. If one semantic root of dialogue as con-versation points to 'conversion' (*conversare, convergere, conversio* - converse, convergence, conversion), another one points to di-version, inversion and refraction, which are 'not bound necessarily to echo the voice of metropolitan fantasy' (Dresch 1988).[48]

Thus, the multiple displacement of the localised Rishi does not prevent them from attaining some results by which Christianity is for them something more and something different from the 'salvation' proposed by missionary discourse, to include their understanding of total salvation even in everyday life. In this sense, although I share Appadurai's concern that "the problem of place and voice is ultimately a problem of power", I would not underestimate the power of 'localised others', and I would be careful not to quantify dialogue as relevant only when "there are as many persons in Papua New Guinea studying Philadelphia" (1988a:20). This implies giving in to the theory that the 'mobile outsiders and observers .... are the movers, the seers, the knowers' (Appadurai 1988b:37), be they from Philadelphia or Papua New Guinea.

In sum, on the one hand, I suggest paying more attention to the inventiveness of the 'localised other' to displace discourses of power and, on the other, I foresee for both the missionary and the

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48 See Vicente Rafael (1987) who makes a clear connection between conquest, translation and conversion in Spanish language, as this was used to Christianise the Tagalog and the way the Tagalog "changed the meaning of Christian missionary discourse".

anthropologist, a further displacement which is irreducible to comprehension and signification, given that their place is to be constantly displaced (u-topos) and the voice is that of the Other saying "Thou shall not kill!".[49]

Given the Rishis' unassuming disposition, it sometimes proved challenging during interviews to provoke an answer as to how they see themselves. It was easier to obtain this when I was accompanied by a Rishi trusted by them. This can be seen in the positive results obtained when my presence was mediated by Roghunath Das (a Rishi graduate from Dumuria) among the Hindu Rishi, and by Dominic Halder (Baradal seminarian) among the Christian Rishi. Both of them were young enough not to impose themselves on others, and were respected by the elders for their personal achievements. If initially my presence aroused curiosity, in time it became accepted and collaboration was rarely refused. The Hindu and Christian Rishi both associated me with the mission, but since in the first instance (Chuknagar) no pastoral activity was underway, my presence was unexceptional, whereas in the Christian environment I was more closely associated with the missionaries, albeit considered a 'different' one, much interested in their life and history. Although acquainted with other missionaries interested in the life of the group, both Hindus and Christians showed positive surprise at my interest in their *nicu* (low) group, and the time I was dedicating to 'research' among them. However, after their initial astonishment and a list of reasons why they had nothing to offer, as if to excuse themselves for who they were, they were even more surprised after further questioning to discover their positive values, and became eager to communicate them. This took the form of exchange among the Hindu Rishi themselves, at meetings with the Rishi teachers working in the Chuknagar-Tala-Dumuria feeder-schools, and with the young people and the elders of Chuknagar. Despite their low self-esteem, their limited academic preparation and their ironic reading of events surrounding their group, they have taught me how to conduct a dialogue. Unfortunately, limitations of time prevented me from discovering them in all their richness, but the dialogue remains open.

In a Christian environment the collaboration of the catechists proved essential to gain insight into the group which otherwise remains obscure to the most inquisitive missionary. The reluctance of many Christians to explain their 'superstitions', their Hindu practices, their internal quarrels and their misunderstandings with the priests and the Bishop, could be clarified during interviews with the catechists, who, generally speaking, would not cover up the failings of their Christians. On the contrary, these became a source of jokes during catechists' meetings, and a fall-back position, when problems arose, to prove the difficulty of their job and the necessity for their activity. Interviews with some Christian leaders required tact, given their disagreements with the missionary in charge and my association with the latter; but often this offered a chance for these leaders to express their point of view and to correct a missionary 'western' understanding of the situation. One of these leaders lamented

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49 In the final conclusion I will return to a discussion of these issues with particular reference to Levinas and Gramsci.

that he had given a lot of informations about the Hindu and Christian Rishi to other missionaries, but his name never appeared in their writings as the main informant.

My presence among the missionaries, in the role of researcher/anthropologist, engendered a variety of interpretations, some of which I felt, others were reported to me, and others again no doubt have remained unexpressed and undiscovered. Being one of them, it was not difficult for me to gain insight into the missionary group: I knew all of them, had met many in previous years before going to the field, and some had been my classmates since the late sixties. The majority seemed to accept my presence and intentions to do research among the Rishi, which was not a novelty since other missionaries had done this in the past. When I announced that my interest expanded to the Rishi Christians and their encounter-dialogue with the missionaries, some reacted positively, especially those involved with the Rishi, while others showed dismay: "Then, you are going to investigate us!" If some missionaries had great expectations for what I was doing, especially in retracing the past history of the Rishi mission and its present developments, others were not greatly impressed, nor was I there to impress them. My desire to carry out research into this field came from the growing interest among missionaries to find answers to a changing reality. The approval and the collaboration I received from many, meant that they too were searching for explanations, and asking themselves questions. As I often repeated, I did not feel I was going to provide many solutions but, on the contrary, raise more questions, and if anything good came of it, this would reflect the choice of dialogue as inspiring the whole project.

While my dialogue with some missionaries and some Rishi has continued since I left the field in 1989, I have suspended the dialogue with the authorities of my former order, who, besides, were never too pleased with what I was doing. In fact, in the meantime, I have left missionary life. This in no way means that I regret my past activity, but I certainly see it from a different perspective. If the bias of 'being a missionary' writing about missionaries, is present in my work, this cannot be dispelled by simply affirming my aspiration to 'objectivity'. I would rather appeal to 'participant observation' and the tension towards dialogue derived from it, which makes me believe that the Other can never be the end-product of my findings and writing, for his alterity remains 'otherwise than being', always open to future dialogues.

PART ONE

THE RISHI IN SOUTH-WEST BANGLADESH

Introduction

The Rishi are not the only Untouchables, strictly speaking, present in our area of enquiry, although they epitomise the reality of such groups as they are known all over South Asia. The Namasudra, the Jele, the Malo, the Dom or the Pods among others, are also present in South-West Bangladesh but, for many reasons, they seem to have lost their 'strict' untouchability. Not only do the latter treat the Rishi as Untouchables, but the Rishi themselves seem to be divided into different segments, lending credence to the view that Untouchables in general, replicating the system of the caste Hindus, share a cultural consensus with the system that excludes them and defines them as fundamentally low. Taking the Dumontian view of ideological homogeneity of the caste order to its extreme, Moffatt maintains that Untouchables "participate willingly in what might be called their own oppression" (1979: 303). This view has been recently challenged by Deliège who criticises Moffatt for moving from "a structural concept (replication) to a cultural one (consensus)" (1992: 165), confusing, in a way common among structuralists, "their models with the reality" (ibid.: 167). Deliège points out that even Dumont's pure/impure dichotomy "does not explain everything", even when used by Untouchables, since "the existence of a 'dominant' ideology does not rule out the development of other ideologies". In fact, "the Harijan sub-culture is not necessarily a counter-culture, but it may take the form of an open opposition to the oppressive system" (ibid.: 168). Deliège's critique is at its best when he points out that Moffatt's view of Untouchables as "ahistorical passive victims" does not take account of the many Dalit movements in India today. This opens the way for Deliège to relate the impurity of Untouchables to their 'powerlessness and servitude', stressing that ritual segregation and economic disabilities go hand in hand. Given this premise, it surprises me that Deliège does not feel the need to address directly those elements that are, according to him, 'theoretically incompatible' in the Untouchables' position, given that the latter "are both the victims and the agents of the caste system, its defenders and its enemies" (1992: 171).

A common feature of the history of Untouchable groups is their experience of permanent exclusion, of having been made different, born not to be respected as Others, but to be oppressed. For the Rishi this becomes a plea, almost an invocation and a supplication: *Amrao je manus!* We too are humans! The Rishi, just like other Untouchables I would suspect, are convinced that their separation from the Onenness of humanity is basically man-made, and they do not believe in their fundamental impurity. It is this central Upanishadic idea of *Ek-Eka* (One -Oneness), not as a written code but as a living reality implicit in the Rishi way of thinking, that seems to motivate them to replicate, reproduce or re-create the system, despite running the risk of falling prey to the dominant ideology.

The patterns of spatio-geographical and physical exclusion imposed on the Rishi are a clear sign of their total segregation from society: their hamlets are outside the village area, usually in secluded spaces, with poor or no communication at all; they cannot enter the temple, but are called to play in front of it as musicians and drum players; they occupy the far end of the market-place; at school, children are either separated from the rest or attend from the verandah; they are not served in public places. The physical space denied to the Rishi represents their separation from all other spheres of life: religious, cultural, political and economic. The symbolic meaning of 'empty space' which separates the Rishi from the village is illustrative of an ambiguous, liminal, and dangerous position, destined to remain permanent, vis-à-vis society.[1] Their burden of (eternal) guilt has no appeal so that, even in everyday life, if something happens in a village they are the first to be blamed and no civil or legal authority is prepared to defend them.

It is only from this perspective that we can make sense of the Rishis' drive to return from the periphery to the centre and oneness of society, their desire to abolish the 'empty space', and their eagerness to adopt those signs that are commonly used in society to make someone *manus*. 'Replication and consensus' can be explained as a need to use a language understood by others. But the Rishi do not necessarily attach to this language the same meaning. As Deliège reminds us, although Untouchables use the categories of purity and pollution, they do not consider themselves as 'inherently polluted' (1992: 166) and their internal subdivisions are more territorial than hierarchical (1992: 164). As we shall see, not only are the Rishi aware of the disadvantages such divisions create for them, but they also lament the divisions created by others to weaken their political power, as in the case of the Dumuria Rishi. As for the use of Hindu religious symbolism by the Rishi, my informants, like those of Moffatt ("Only Hindu Gods are available"; 1979: 268), are aware that they have borrowed their forms of religiousness from the *Bara Hindura* ('big' Hindus) since this is what is available to them. However, far from representing 'consensus', the mere fact of adopting Hindu symbolism becomes a challenge to the system itself.

The greatest challenge the Rishi seem to present to society is, in fact, the constant reminder that they too are human. They use the system by showing respectability, in terms of what is respectable for others, but without attaching "too much importance to the dominant values" (Deliège 1992: 167). This is transparent in the use the Rishi make of beef, and often carrion, in their diet, though they deny it. In this respect, the attitude of caste Hindus and Muslims is even more ambiguous, given that they despise the Rishi for eating carrion, but they are more afraid of a 'reformed' and educated Rishi who has abandoned such practices. Among other things, this Rishi may persuade other Rishi that their work as

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1 Deliège, reporting on how "Untouchables have to be kept apart, at the periphery of civilization" (1992: 170), refers to the strong Tamil opposition between the uur (village) and the forest. The Rishi experience in Bangladesh is very similar: not only does their name refer to the holy men who received the Veda and used to meditate in the forest, but their are referred to as *Bouno gottro* (people of the jungle). Only when the forest has been cleared, others do not disdain taking the land away from the Rishi.

skinners, source of their untouchability, is what builds up the capital of 'pure' businessmen,[2] Hindu and Muslim alike (cf. Appendix 3: 'The Rishi and the Cow'). This is not to justify either 'Sanskritization' or Christianization of the Rishi, but an attempt to show that the ambiguities of the Rishi are often less ambiguous than those of society at large, given that the means used by the Rishi to reach their goal must not be confused with the goal itself.[3]

In this part, I present ethnographic material on the Rishi, seeking to highlight those characteristics according to which they identify themselves as a group and which have enabled them, despite their many disabilities, to negotiate with the caste Hindus, the Muslim majority, and the missionary. By emphasising the Rishis' ability for dialogue-negotiation rather than their 'replication and consensus' I aim to challenge a vision of static history which locates the 'Untouchables' in a fixed position, more as objects of study than active subjects of their own history. In the first chapter, after a discussion of the presence of the (Muchi)-Rishi in Bengal from ethnographies and Census Reports, I estimate the presence of the group in Khulna and Jessore. Particular attention is paid to the region of our enquiry, the area of the Betna, Kabadak and Bhadra rivers. After assessing recent surveys of the Rishi, I introduce in chapter two a case study of Dumuria Rishi *para* (cluster of houses), concentrating on the life style of this *para*, their occupation, and their relationship with the caste Hindus and the Muslims. Chapter three focuses on the experience of 'untouchability' of the group, its origin and continuity, and the consequences it has for the everyday life of the Rishi. The final chapter discusses their *dharmikata* or 'religiousness', as part of the struggle-dialogue to re-affirm their 'humanity'.

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2 As Deliège reminds us: "... Untouchables have to be denied control of the means of production..... (This) permanent state of economic dependence.... is an essential aspect of untouchability" (1992: 170-1).

3 Although Deliège, with the support of Mosse (1985: 256), states that " untouchables consider their position in the system in a secular idiom and describe their lowness in terms of enforced servitude and poverty, not in terms of ritual untouchability" (1992: 166), he recognises that untouchables "know that the language of pure/impure opposition has to be used if one is to be understood and respected" (Ibid.: 167). I suspect that Untouchables' commitment to ritual activity is deeper than that, since many of them all over India are reinterpreting religion and ritual to their advantage and giving life to what has been labeled 'political theology' (cf. Contursi 1993).

1. The (Muchi-)Rishi of Bengal/Bangladesh

Ethnographies and Census Reports

Whilst the name *Muchi* (or *Mochi*) had been widely used all over the Indian subcontinent to refer to those associated with leather work,[4] the 'Samsad Bangali Abhidan' refers to the word 'Muchi' as *Carmakar* or *Camar*, meaning "someone who removes or detaches, causes to come away or to come off" (Fagan 1979). Thus common usage of the term in Bengali denotes a leather-worker, a shoemaker (repairer), a tanner and a skinner, but although all over Bangladesh 'Muchi' indicates one who is related to leather, especially a cobbler, in our area the word identifies a particular group, not necessarily - or no longer - connected with leather-work.[5]

Wise (1883: 360), the first ethnographer to describe extensively this group, and Risley (1891: 95-99)[6] following him, classify the *Muchi-Rishi* as the 'Bengali Chamars' who, trying to pass incognito as Rishi, added this last name to their caste occupation. As a result, although they repudiated the name Chamar, Rishi and Muchi are synonyms of the same caste.[7] Both Wise and Risley seem most concemed to classify the Muchi-Rishi as Chamars, who moved to Bengal from the West.[8] Thus Wise justifies his position, alleging that the difference is related to their 'long residence in Bengal', which had altered them 'in several respects', without specifying the duration of this residence or suggesting any hypothesis to solve the problem. It has also been proposed that the Rishis' claim to be a distinct caste from the Chamars is a "pure theoretical exercise since there are no Camars or similar groups besides the Muchi in the whole of the Kabadak river area" (Tobanelli 1989: 15). Official papers, however, and Census reports insisted on calling them Chamars, while they recognised themselves as Rishi and even

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4 The word Muchi is derived, according to Crooke (1896:497), from the Sanskrit mochica and the Hindustani mojna meaning to fold, and the term mojah for socks and stockings originates from the same root (Russell 1916: 244). In Mysore the word moju (Iyer 1931: 206) meaning stockings and the Canarese machi meaning shoes (Hassan 1920: 508), go back to the same Sanskrit root.

5 When I addressed a paper on my research at the University of Dhaka, many of those present thought that the people in question were the "cobblers", classified as a work group, and not a jati, known as the Muchi-Rishi, whose existence was unknown to them.

6 Risley (1891/2: 95) states that the Muchi-Rishi of Bengal "are by origin doubtless a branch of the Chamars, though its members now repudiate that name and claim to be a distinct caste of somewhat higher social position". Among other reasons, Risley must have based this statement upon the fact that the Rishi of Bengal appeared together with the Chamar in the 1872 Census, whereas in 1881 they were listed separately. Apparently, no reason was given to justify these different 'classifications', which occurred also in later Censuses. One plausible explanation could be that the same Muchi-Rishi opted for giving a separate or different entry-name.

7 "There can be no doubt, however, that they belong to the same race, although long residence in Bengal has altered them in several respects" (Wise 1883: 360-363). Fagan, following the definition of the *Bangali Samsad*, supports the same idea: "... From this we can conclude that the Muchi is a Chamar, who like the Chamar works in skin and leather and as the dictionary meaning suggests has the task of removing these skins from the carcasses of animals, especially the cow since it is it which provides the hide necessary to leather workers" (Fagan 1979:3).

8 Wise and Risley seem to follow Dalton (1960: 313) [1872] who maintains that the Mochis belong to Bengal and the Chamars to Bihar.

nowadays, although the word 'Muchi' is contemptuously applied to the Rishi, 'Chamar' is considered a term of outright abuse (*Camarer bacca* - Chamar's son).

According to some *dalil* (land documents) collected in Dumuria, the Muchi-Rishi of that area were addressed officially as 'Chamar' in 1914 and 1917. Later in 1928 their name changed to 'Rishi' and only recently the name used is that of 'Das'. The *dalil* collected in Simulia (Jessore) among the Christian Rishi, reveal that in 1903 and 1908 they were addressed as 'Rishi' belonging to the '*Muci jati* '; in 1913-14, their name was still 'Rishi' but belonging to the '*Khristan jati* '; finally in 1922, the name and the *jati* were 'Rishi'.[9] The Rishi themselves explain the derivation of their name according to the myths of origin collected in the area (see Appendix 2). According to these myths the name 'Rishi' is derived from their ancestor, a *Rsi* or Rishimoni, one of the writers of the ancient Veda, later fallen into disgrace. Another tradition quoted by Hassan (1920:508) traces the origin of this *jati* to Rohidash[10] or Harlyianoru, a great religious reformer who flourished at the beginning of the fifteenth Century. He was a disciple of Ramananda and a Chamar, as many of his followers.[11]

Although it cannot be proved that the Rishi of central Bengal did not in recent times belong to a tribal group, many features or 'alterations' as Wise labels them, indicate other patterns, while not excluding this possibility.[12] The Rishi were not agriculturists, and when in some areas they did became such, it was a long process. They migrated easily from one place to another, following the herds, or looking for alternative jobs as basket-makers, musicians, drum-makers and players, bone collectors and skinners. They placed such little value on the land received in payment for musical performances that they sold or lost it, and even nowadays the land on which they live is often rented. Only recently, with

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9 The explanation given by some 'Muchi' of the Simulia area for adopting the name 'Rishi', is that 50 or 60 years ago a young educated Rishi called Deben Babu came from Calcutta and summoned a caste meeting which took place at Nabaran. At the meeting, apparently, Deben Babu urged the Muchis to stop skinning and eating cow meat and to call themselves Rishi. (See Fagan 1979: 12). The *Mission Diary of Jessore* refers to a meeting held in Nabaron on 24 April, 1938: "Great meeting of Depressed Classes at Nabharan, organised by Hindus. Great talks, plenty of fun, but people return disillusioned. Some had also gone from Kaligonj, but they were entirely disappointed" (JES. 88). Undoubtedly by then the name 'Rishi' had already been adopted by the majority of Muchi living in that area.

10 "The Rai Dasis are a Vaisnava sect of N. India, founded by Rai (or Ravi) Das, one of the Twelve chief disciples of Ramananda. Its members are low caste Chamars, or leather-workers, and, in fact, Chamars, as a caste, often call themselves, Rai Dasis. .... Rai Dasa's home was at Benares, and, as a disciple of Ramananda, he probably flourished in the earlier part of the 15th century A.D. He was a fellow-disciple with Kabir, with whose teachings his doctrine regarding the uselessness of the Vedas and Brahmanical Hinduism had much in common" (Grierson 1955:560).

11 "..... He must have enjoyed some celebrity, as some of his works are included in the *Adi Granth* of the Sikhs. . . . We must be contented with the authority of the *Bhakta Mala* where he makes a rather important figure...." (Wilson 1904:57-59). The hypothesis that the name 'Rishi' "could be the vernacular corruption of one of the names given to Ruidas' followers such as: Ruidasis, Ravidashis and Roishis" (Tobanelli 1989:6; cfr. also Fagan 1979:13-15) coexists with the explanation given by the myths of the Rishi in South-West Bangladesh which clearly refer to the *Rsi* as their ancestors. As we shall see, the devotion of the Rishi to Rui Das and their commitment to Bhakti and Vaisnava movements on the one hand, and on the other their attachment to the main stream of Brahmanical Hinduism, are not in contradiction to each other in the Rishis' attempt to establish a dialogue with their environment. Furthermore, from the Rishis' point of view, it was felt important to separate themselves from the Chamar and to assert their own identity as a different *jati*.

12 The preservation of tribal groups in the northern area of Bengal and Assam (Santal, Garo, Oraon, Pahari etc..) was possible only because they were outside the routes of invasions and 'civilisation'. The 'colonisation' of the plains of Bengal, rich in water for the cultivation of rice, did not extend to the hills of the North. Iyer (1931:208), describing the religion of the Mochi in Mysore, states that "they have their own rites, which belong to their aboriginal condition, which are still practised". Hunter, in his 'Statistical Account of Jessor', classifies both the Muchi and the Chamar, among others, as "semi-Hinduized aboriginal classes".

the pressure of overpopulation, do they seem to attach more value to land. Despite living close to rivers, they have never become skilled fishermen, preferring a meat diet. The custom of drying meat to preserve it is remembered in some areas of Jessore and Khulna, and still practised in the South. They showed very little respect for the animals employed in agricultural labour such as oxen and cows, being notorious cattle poisoners. Their semi-nomadic habits, even within a restricted area, and their inclination for petty thieving, cattle-stealing and cattle-poisoning, associated them with other groups for whose control in 1871 the Criminal Tribes Act was sanctioned.[13]

In the 1891 Census 404,194 Muchi-Rishi were registered in Bengal, out of whom a good 70% (285,141) were living in the districts of Bardwan, 24 Parganas, Nadia, Jessore and Khulna, and here they used to settle in remote areas, close to the forest, rivers or swamps, avoiding others and being avoided by them.[14] Their movements within the Jessore and Khulna Districts during the last century (see TABLE I), reveal that , when they could not find means for living, they moved to the South, closer to the Sunderbon Forest, and again, in the case of cyclones which swept the South coast they sought refuge in northern areas.[15]

While in the first Census of 1872 the 'Muchi' were included under the heading of the Chamars, in 1881 they had a separate entry.[16] In 1901, they were classed once again with the Chamar, but their approximate total (440.000 in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa) for this year was given in the 1911 Census statistics. In this last Census the total number of Muchi given for Bengal alone is 455.000.[17] Despite a joint classification of Muchi and Chamars in 1921, the Census' officers felt the need to clarify their position and give a broad definition of the two groups in question, and although both were classified as leather-workers, the Muchis were considered as belonging to Bengal, while the Chamars were immigrants from Bihar and further West,[18] re-proposing the division made earlier by Wise and Risley.

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13 See Kapadia 1952: 99-125. As we shall see, the Muchi-Rishi of the Baradal-Satkhira area, when threatened to be put under the Criminal Tribes Act, sought refuge in Christianity.

14 The figures of 1891 show that there had been a great increase of Rishi presence in Jessore (53.718, +140.38%) and in Bardwan-Birbhum (119.632, +61.4%),while they had considerably decreased in Khulna (28.471,-44.42%). (O'Donnell, C.J., *Census of India*, 1891, vol.V, The Lower Provinces of Bengal and their Feudatories, Calcutta 1893: 9).

15 Their former association of a "confederation of villages" (27 is their ideal number,), to be discussed later, indicates more a tribal group organization than a classic group of 'Untouchables' in any given village.

16 In 1881 they totalled 325.676. With a majority Rishi presence in Bardwan (48.648), Khulna (41.147), Nadiya (34.608), 24 Parganas (24.814), Jessore (22.347), and Birbhum (25.716) and a total population of 197.280, it can be established that over 60% of the Muchi-Rishi population in Bengal were living in these districts of Central Bengal.

17 *Census of India* 1911, vol.V, Part 1: 523. The Muchi of Jessore District had decreased in 1911 to 46.916 (*Bengal District Gazetteers*, Jessore, 1912:49). A short note regarding the *Muchi Chotabhagya* of Jessore, numbering a hundred families, states that the members of this group who remove night-soil had been outcasted by their *jati* because of their activity.

18 "It is not an easy matter to separate these two castes, which both follow traditionally the occupation of leather workers. The Muchis generally belong to Bengal, while the Chamars are more often immigrants from Bihar and further West. [emphasis added]... There has been a considerable falling-off in the immigration of such people as these from the West in the last ten years ...". The total number for Muchi and Chamar given for Bengal are: 548.913 in 1901, 591.786 in 1911 [+7,8%] and 569.966 in 1921 [-5,7%] (*Census of India*, 1921, vol.V, Part 1: 353).

In the 1931 Census, not only were the 'Muchi' listed as a separate group, but their total number from the previous Census, separate from the Chamar, was also given.[19]

Apart from a regional diversity, other reasons compel us to believe that the Muchi-Rishi of Bengal cannot be associated with the Chamar solely on the grounds of being leather-workers.[20] Many of them, for instance in the South region of Khulna, resorted to the skinning of dead animals when no alternative jobs were available. After floods or periods of famine, their services as musicians and basket-makers were less in demand and migration to other areas was inevitable: skinning dead animals and working leather were then the easiest, highly remunerated and most obvious choice. The possibility of becoming agriculturists has been an option followed by a minority and even these had to struggle to keep their land safe from the Muslim majority after the Partition of India. Some old people said they had a better life under British rule and the Hindu zamindari: at that time nobody's land was their land, and they could freely follow the herds in swampy and uncultivated areas. With the Partition of India, the Rishi found themselves in the same situation as many other minority Tribal groups who were divided according to a logic which did not respect their rights as people and their ethnicity and saw themselves as a community split between two different nations.

The Rishi of Khulna, Jessore and Khustia

From the statistics given in Table I we can deduce that the Rishi of Khulna, Jessore, and Khustia constituted a substantial percentage of that group in Bengal.[21] Although their decreased presence from 1891 to 1931 was certainly due to the great mobility of the group, it also reflects their high relative

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19 "This caste numbered 417.594 in 1921 and has decreased by 0,8 per cent to 414.291 on the present occasion" (*Census of India*, 1931, vol. V, Part 1, p. 480). Taking into account that the total number given in 1921 for both Muchi and Chamars was 569.966, it results that the Chamar totalled in Bengal on that occasion 152.372, equal to 26,73%, while the Muchi were 73,26%. On that occasion the largest numbers were returned from Bardwan-Birbhum (109.190), Jessore (37.158), 24 Parganas (33.434), Nadia (30.561), and Khulna (21.435). 55,94% of the total Rishi population in Bengal were thus residing in these 6 Central Bengal Districts. While they had increased in the Eastern District of Mymensingh - from 12.565 in 1891 to 24.041 in 1931-on this occasion they had considerably decreased in Khulna (-24,71% in comparison with 1891), and in Jessore (-30,82% in comparison with 1891). (*Census of India*, 1931, vol. VI, Part 2:53). In this Census it was also shown that 59% of the Muchi were employed in their caste occupation while only 20% of the Chamar in Calcutta worked in leather.

20 The separation between Muchi and Chamar was also remarked on by ethnographers in other Provinces. Sometimes the name 'Muchi' had been classified by them as an occupational sub-caste of the Chamars (Crooke 1896, vol. 3: 497-99) at other times 'Muchi', as in the Punjab, denoted only an occupation (Rose 1911, vol. 3: 123-4). According to Rose in the East of Punjab, the name Mochi was usually applied to the more skilled workmen of the towns whereas in the West it was simply used to designate a Muslim Chamar. In the Central Provinces the antagonism between the two groups was more accentuated: "As a natural result of the pretentions to mobility made by the Mochis, there is no love lost between them and the Chamars...." (Russell 1916 / 1: 248).

21 In fact, in 1891, they formed 20.33% of the entire Rishi group in Bengal, while they diminished to 15.36% in 1911 and still further in 1931, falling to 14,14%. The proportion of the Rishi in Khulna District was, out of the whole population (1.079.949; cfr. *Bangladesh District Gazetteers (BDG)*. Khulna, 1978:64-66), 3.8% in 1881, and it decreased to 2.4% in 1891 (total pop. 1.177.652), until it reached only 1.9%c. in 1931(total pop. 1.943.218). In Jessore District instead, the proportion of the Rishi compared to the whole population increased from 1.15% in 1881 (total pop. 1.939.375; cfr. *Imperial Gazetteers of India*, vol. 1:: 466) to 2.84% in 1891 (total pop. 1.888.827), and then it slightly decreased again to 2.64% in 1901 (total pop. 1.813.155).

mortality during periods of floods and famines. They were particularly affected by the cyclone of 1919, when "in addition to influenza and the high prices, Khulna suffered from a good deal of sickness...and to some extent from failure of crops due to salt-water inundation".[22] This was repeated during the 1943 famine, which was preceded by a cyclone and cholera epidemic.[23]

With the Partition of India in 1947, widespread movements of population affected these three districts; many Muslims from India migrated to Jessore, Khustia and above all Khulna, and many Hindus left for India.[24] The Muslims (*muhajirs*) moving from West Bengal into Khulna and Jessore "were essentially agriculturalists and their absorption required land for them".[25] Moreover, during the 1951-61 decade, Khulna attracted many from other districts of Bangladesh.[26] These were eventually accommodated at the expense of the Hindus who left this region, and this exodus has not ceased in the last decade (1980-90). Later, the Islamization of the country put much pressure on those Hindus remaining in Bangladesh since their land was declared 'enemy property', provoking thereby a reaction.[27]

The situation of the Rishi was not substantially modified as a result of these major changes or of those which took place in 1971 with Independence. Certainly their status has not improved and the competition for scarce resources has increased, if we consider that the population density stood at 1850 per sq. miles in 1986, and the rural population in 1981 still covered approximately 84.8% of the total.[28]

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22 *BDG - Khulna*, Dacca, 1978: 65.

23 Ibid.: 66. "... The signs of famine became visible about July 1942 and its worst effects in the form of epidemics continued until December, 1944...".

24 In Jessore, where the Muslims were already a majority in 1951 forming 68.6% of the total population, they increased to 80.2% in 1981. The Hindus of that district, who formed 31.3% of the population in 1951, were reduced to 19.6% in 1981 (*Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics -BBS-*, Census 1981, Jessore District, Dhaka 1984: XXXVII). In the 1951 Census 43,077 persons in Jessore District described themselves as refugees from India. Indeed, there were 17 refugee camps in Jessore set up to receive people coming from India. (*Bangladesh District Gazetteer - Jessore*, Dhaka 1978:56). In Khulna District the Muslims increased from 54.6% in 1951 to 71.9%, in 1981, and the Hindus, many of whom had already left by 1951, decreased from 45.2% in that same year to 27.2% in 1981(*BBS*, Khulna District, Dhaka 1984: XXXVIII).

25 *BDG - Khulna*, Dacca 1978: 67.

26 ".... Khulna was one of the districts which attracted more people from other districts of Bangladesh. The reason seems to be that the pressure of population on land in this district being less, it was in a position to accommodate population from outside...." (*BDG - Khulna*, Dhaka 1978:73).

27 Disturbances were registered during 1988-89 in the west borders of India and Bangladesh because the Hindus 'were returning to get their land back'.

28 *Statistical pocket book of Bangladesh*, *BBS* 1987: 4. The density of population in Jessore District was 1587 per sq. mile in 1981 and in Khulna District 1763 per sq. mile (see, *District Statistics, Jessore, BBS 1983*: 4; and ibid., *Khulna* 1983: 4).

Recent statistics of the Rishi presence in Khulna, Khustia and Jessore[29]

In 1975, Peter McNee (1976), a Baptist pastor from New Zealand, undertook a survey of the Churches and Missions of Bangladesh. With the intention of finding some 'target groups' as possible objectives for missionary activity, he recorded among others the size of the Rishi presence in Bangladesh. He gives their total presence in the country as 234,315, mainly concentrated in the districts of Dhaka (30,159), Mymensingh (35,622), Khustia (44,739), Khulna (30,668) and Jessore (58,588). According to these statistics, over 57% of the entire Rishi population in Bangladesh was present at that time in the last three districts which constitute part of the Khulna Diocese and the area of our enquiry.

In 1980-81 P. Lupi, a Xaverian missionary working in Khulna, carried out an extensive survey of the Rishi in Khulna and Satkhira Districts. He visited a total of 14 *Thana* (police stations and administrative units, now *Upozila*), registering the presence of 307 Rishi *para* with a total of 5495 households and 38,219 Rishi. Their biggest concentrations were found in Tala (9,926), Dumuria (5,453), Satkhira (4,459) and Kolaroa (3,871). The survey also assessed the problem of land, education, emigration to India and religious affiliation of the group[30] (cfr. TABLE II). If we add an estimated 8000 Muchi-Rishi residing in Bagherath District, the total number of Rishi in the whole of the former Khulna District was 42,000c. in 1981.[31]

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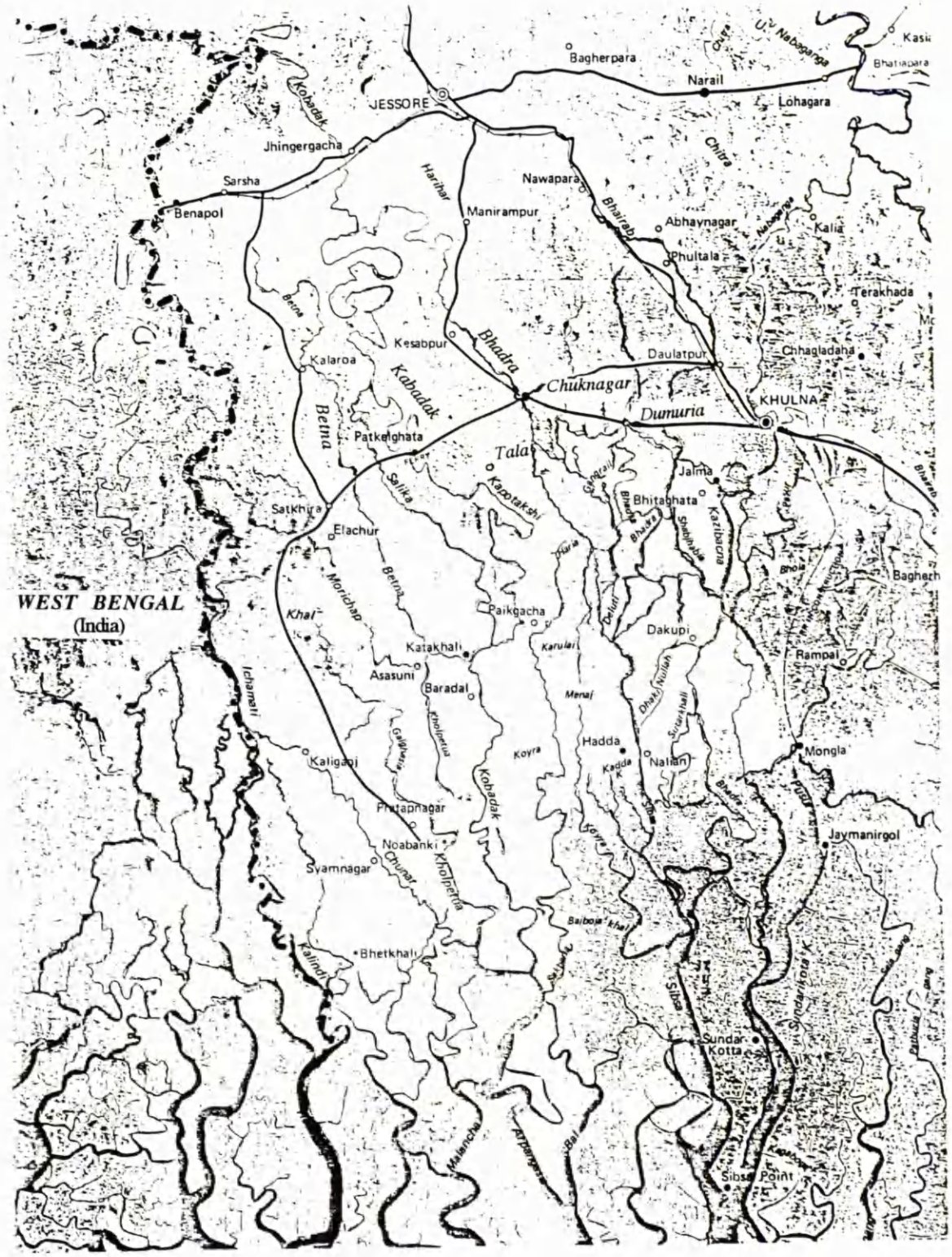
29 The 1931 Census was the last officially to record the Muchi-Rishi presence in Bengal. In the later Censuses of 1941, 1951 and 1961, the Rishi have been registered together with the other Scheduled Castes. In 1941 in Khulna district, 24.2% of the total population were registered as Scheduled Castes; they increased to 32.2% in 1951, decreasing in 1961 to 27.75%. The majority of them belong to the Chandal and the Pod castes or, as they now call themselves, the Namasudra and the Nama (*Bangladesh District Gazetteers - Khulna*, Dhaka 1978: 78) The total number of Scheduled Castes was 470,550 in 1941, 668,373 in 1951 and 679,403 in 1961.
In Jessore District the Scheduled Castes formed 18.87% of the total population in 1951 and decreased to 16.61% in 1961. The Namasudra Jati was the most numerous also in this district (*Bangladesh District Gazetteers-Jessore*, Dhaka 1978:61). The total number of Scheduled Castes in Jessore was 311,892 in 1951 and 363,853 in 1961. Their decreased proportion in the 1961 Census was due to high immigration from India during that last decade.

30 Lupi, P. *Statistiche sui Rishi di Khulna e Satkhira*, Unpublished Statistics and graphics, Tala, 1981.

31 In 1988-9 I conducted a survey in Dumuria and Tala *Thana* registering an increase of 9.4% over the Rishi population present there in 1981. Applying this sample to the totality of the group, it is possible to establish a presence of approx. 46,000 in this area in 1989. The Rishi group in Jessore has also increased from the last figure given by McNee in 1975, and even though a considerable number left for India, their presence has not markedly decreased and an approximate figure of 68-70,000 can be taken as the Rishi presence in Jessore in 1989-90.

Fieldwork area among the Hindu Rishi:
Chuknagar, Tala and Dumuria villages;
the Betna, Kabadak (Kapotakshi), and Bhadra Rivers area.



The Area of the Betna, Kabadak and Bhadra Rivers

The area under examination is a wide alluvial plain of deltaic configuration intersected by numerous rivers, which are connected by interlacing cross-channels called *khal*. The country surface is flat, only slightly above flood-level, and the river banks are higher than the adjacent land, thus forming a series of depressions in-between the rivers' courses which form numerous marshes or *bil*. The rivers, which enter this area from the North, are off-shoots of the Ganges and its affluents. Most of these rivers have now silted up and become, in the North of Jessore District, shallower every year. In the southern part of Jessore and in Khulna, these rivers are tidal and do not depend on the Ganges floods for their supply.

The area of our enquiry is crossed by three main rivers. The most important is the Kabadak, a tributary of the Bhairab, whose main stream was diverted into the Kabatak in 1790c.[32] After crossing Jessore, the Kabadak enters Khulna District forming for some distance the natural boundary between Khulna and Satkhira Districts, and then becoming a large tidal stream.[33] The Betna, an off-shoot of the Kabadak, flows almost parallel to it on its western side. After passing some miles through Jessore, it leaves this district and enters West Bengal. Re-entering Jessore it then streams towards Satkhira district following a southerly direction until it falls into the Kholpetua. The Harihar river, which rises from the Kabadak near Jhikargacha, falls into the Bhadra at Altapole. Between this point and Keshabpur, the Bhadra is mostly dried up and under cultivation. Below Keshabpur it widens out into a tidal river. After entering the Khulna district at Baratiya, it continues in a south-easterly direction towards the Sunderbans.

The most numerous Rishi Communities in Jessore and Khulna are found along the course of the Betna, Kabadak and Bhadra rivers. They have come to settle either close to these rivers or in the inner areas between them. These rivers have constituted in the past, and to some extent even now, a natural boundary between different groups within the Rishi *Jati*. The Kabadak, for instance, marks the boundary between those Rishi who converted to Christianity, on the western side, and those who did not convert, on the eastern. The same division can be applied to those Rishi who adapted more easily to agriculture (to the East) and those who did not (to the West of the Kabadak).[34] Nowadays the division is not as marked as in the past, due to Rishi migrations all over the area. The partition of the Country has also contributed to the weakening of these divisions within the group, accentuating, however, their

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32 *Bangladesh District Gazetteers -Jessore*, Dhaka 1978:9.

33 "It is also known as the Kabdoak or as the Kapotakshi [or] 'dove's eye', a picturesque name suggested by its placid stream."(*Bangladesh District Gazetteers- Khulna*, Dhaka 1978:11).

34 This last division largely corresponds to the two sections of the group reported also by Risley: the *Bara Bhagjya* (big group) and the *Chata Bhagjya* (small group) or the *Bara Bhegi* and the *Chata Bhegi*, (as they are known today), the former who profess to be only cultivators and the latter who "deal in hides, act as musicians, and do various kinds of leather work" (Risley 1891/2: 96).

separation from the rest of the group in West Bengal. Nevertheless, in matters of marriage and other alliances, the river still constitutes a divide today.

These rivers were important to the Rishi way of life, especially when in times of famines, cyclones, and other natural disasters, they decided to migrate. Many of them would use the rivers to transport poisoned cattle, which could be recovered safely downstream. Others, especially those living in the Betna riverine area and on the west bank of the Kabadak, would collect bones for processing in Calcutta. Finally these rivers were used by the Rishi as a way of escape when suspected of some criminal activity.[35]

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35 Another minor river worthy of mention is the Muchikhali, which connects the Kumar with the Madhumati river. It was, in the past, the chief channel of communication between Jessore and Faridpur, but since the beginning of the century, navigation has been impossible. In the past, this river was known as the little Barasia, and the change of name to Muchikhali makes one suspect that this is connected with the sanitarian deterioration caused by the Muchikhali in the Magura subdivision, North of Jessore. It is possible that this river marks the far North division of the Rishi living in Khulna and Jessore, since a big swampy area extends South to the river, but no evidence has yet been found to connect the name of the river with that of the group.

2. Present situation of the Group

The 120,000c. Rishi living in Khulna and Jessore constitute a minority of 1.43%c. of the total population in this area. Their dwelling places are still found along rivers or in swampy areas, and well separated from other groups, especially the caste Hindus. Their *para* tend to be uncrowded given the widespread shortage of jobs. The most populous *para* are the longest established, in areas where the Rishi have been able to keep and subsequently cultivate their land. These are mostly found in Jessore and North of Khulna, on the eastern side of the Kabadak. In this area "the pattern of distribution of the Muchi settlements is uniform: in whatever direction one moves one comes across a Muchi *para* within a distance of anything from four to six miles" (Tobanelli 1989:8). The uniformity of the *para* distribution is reinforced by the fact that they were bound together in an alliance of 27, 13 or 11 Rishi *para*. This pattern, which seems to have been consistent in the past, has recently lost much of its effectiveness, especially after the Partition and even more after Independence.[36]

A survey I carried out, while in the field, in 27 Rishi *para* located in the Dumuria-Tala-South Keshabpur area, indicated a population of 8283, with a total of 1274 *paribar* (families) divided into 2,635 men, 2730 women, and 2918 under fifteen. The survey also revealed that the majority of *para* contained a relatively small number of families.[37]

Statistics showing the main occupations of the Rishi in this area,[38] fail to convey the reality of everyday life, when, for instance, a large proportion of daily labourers are forced to resort to other jobs since they are not needed in the fields. The same is true of the musicians who depend on religious festivals and marriages for income. Given these cases, the proportion of those working, at least part-time, as *kuli* or with leather (skinners, cobblers, traders...), is higher than shown in the figures. The percentage of illiteracy[39] are under-estimates since many were registered as literate if able to read and

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36 The ideal pattern of the '27 villages confederation' was followed, as we shall see, by the *Bhadra Samaj* of Dumuria, and has also been found in the Tala region (west of Dumuria): there, if someone wants to propose his candidature to become a *purohit* of the group, must be accepted by the leaders of the 27 villages, and feed them. In Baradal, among the Christian Rishi, the relationship with another 26 Rishi *para* is still remembered by the elders. In Simulia area, Fr. J. Fagan found evidence of this pattern in Kanairali village and its environs, south-west of Jessore (personal communication).

37 There were less than 20 families in 2 *para*; between 21-40 families in 10 *para*; between 41-60 families in another 10 *para*; 4 *para* contained between 61-80 families and only in 1 *para* were there more than 100 families (Tala-Khanpur).

38 Out of 2,635 men, 27.4% worked as share croppers or daily labourers in the fields, 21% were connected with leather work (skinners, cobblers, skin dealers...), 17.3% were engaged in cane and bamboo (*cac-bet*) work, 9.2% were farmers mainly working their own land, 7.3% worked as *kuli* (porters), 6.5% were cart drivers, 7.7% offered their service as musicians, and 4.5% were shop-keepers. A small minority of jute cultivators and shepherds were also found. A few of the men were employed as teachers in the schools run by the mission.

39 In 9 of these 27 Rishi *para* illiteracy reached 88-98%; in 12 *para* it reached 65-73%, and only in 6 *para* was it as low as 45-55%.

write their name, and among the women, especially those marrying very young, the proportion of illiteracy is extremely high.[40]

Case Study of Dumuria Rishi *Para*

The Dumuria *Upozila* with a total population of 224,575 in 1981,[41] occupies a prominent place in the Khulna *Zila* (District). Located west of Khulna and crossed by the Bhadra and Gangrail rivers (east of the Kabadak), "the Dumuria region has been the setting for state-interventionist strategies in ecology, in agriculture and in social structure" (Jahangir 1980: 1). In our case study, which illustrates in microcosm the reality of a Hindu Rishi community, we are mainly concerned with the Rishi living in the outskirts of Dumuria town, headquarters of the *Upozila*, located 17 miles west of Khulna, and with an urban population of 11,077 in 1981.[42]

The *Bhadra*, *Sidur* and *Hogla Samaj*

The Rishi population of Dumuria in 1987[43] (cfr. TABLE 3) comprised 165 *paribar* (families), with a total of 719 people thus divided: 289 under 15 years, 421 over 15, who are considered adults (193 men and 228 women). This group belongs to a 'confederation of 27 Rishi *para*',[44] known as the *BhadraSamaj*, or the well-behaved community, in contrast to the *Sidur* and *Hogla Samaj*.

As their name suggests, they are supposedly more gentle, better educated, cleverer than the other Rishi, and possessing a certain degree of social and religious awareness. By attempting to uphold social rules and customs as well as by keeping themselves apart from the other Rishi, they managed to achieve a certain level of social integration, including mixing with low caste Hindus (Sudra). The rationale and aim behind the 'confederation of 27 villages' (*Satas gram*) was, above all, to regulate the

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40 An increased awareness of the importance of literacy has been fostered in the past fourteen years in those Rishi *para* where a group of Catholic missionaries have organised a web of "feeder schools" as a means of social uplift for the Rishi and other minority groups in the area.

41 Khulna Zila Statistics 1987, *BBS* 1988:10-11. There was a high proportion of Hindus (46.47%) in Dumuria Upozila in comparison to the whole Khulna Region (27.2%), and even more in comparison to the whole of Bangladesh where the Hindus were 11.6% of the total population (cfr. *Demographic Sample Survey*-1982, *BBS* 1988:2).

42 Khulna Zila Statistics-1987, *BBS* 1988:10.

43 These figures refer to a survey carried out in 1987 by a Rishi graduate, Mr. Raghunath Das, who was also my associate in further surveys and interviews carried out in Dumuria during my fieldwork.

44 The 'confederation of 27 Rishi *para*' belonging to this *Samaj* are: Dumuria, Gutudia, Sajyara, Golna, Tipna, Ranai, Bhadrodia, Angordah, Baratia, Putimari (Chuknagar), Shobhna, Chingra, Garer Danga, Jay Khali, Bhandar Para, Noa Kati, Rogonathpur, Deruli, Mikshimil, Madhu Gram, Sholgatia, Sarafpur, Kalikapur, Bania Khali, Shahpur, Ganali, Bederpata.

administration of village justice (*bicar*), to safeguard social unity -favouring marriage exchange - and to organise and conduct religious festivals and celebrations in line, as far as possible, with proper Hindu traditions. This segmentation of the Rishi largely corresponded to a process of 'Brahminization' or Hinduization of the group, which resulted in internal division more than in an upward mobility of the *Bhadra Samaj*. Nevertheless, the latter are said to have obtained a viable degree of internal administrative justice as well as uniform social and religious behaviour, which gave them a certain 'unified culture'. This outcome was favoured by the presence of the headmen (*matabbar*) in each of the 27 villages, who reported to 5 *khudra neta* (small leaders); one of the latter was the *bara neta* (big leader) to whom all the others were accountable. In the case of some small or local problem the *matabbar* had the power to solve it, but in the case of a major problem the 5 central leaders (*khudra* and *bara neta*) would intervene and enforce their solution. Among other responsibilities the *Bara Neta* as the head of the Rishi (or *dalpati*), had to cast out or re-admit someone into the *samaj*,[45] to organise marriage alliances, *sraddha* ceremonies, the observance of religious festivals, to moderate important *bicar* (trials), and to decide about all important matters concerning the *samaj*. Generally speaking, the Rishi leaders, both at a local and at higher level, would represent their *gusthi* (or *gosthi*, 'clan'/descent line) and would secure their authority by establishing new alliances with other *gusthi*. In this sense, leadership became hereditary, but it was often the case that new candidates were chosen, following their success in business or their particular talents.

Oral tradition dates the '27 Rishi villages federation' for the Dumuria area to 150c. years back. At the beginning of this century the *Bara Neta* was Bhoddor Gasai from Deruli village. He is remembered as a very successful judge of village disputes and a *Sadhu* (holy man). After his death, Bidur Rishi, a very powerful man from Sajyara, took over as the *Neta* of the 27 villages. He was in a way a landowner, almost a *jamidar*, even feared by the people of other social groups. The Kali *Puja* was performed regularly in his house complete with the slaughtering of a pair of buffaloes. After his death, his son Abhilas took over the leadership for a short period; he died very young, so Bibesshor Rishi, from Dumuria, was appointed as the new *neta*. The latter ruled from the 1950s to the beginning of the seventies. Reputed to be very clever but stingy in character, Bibesshor is remembered as a bad leader; unable to keep rules and traditions, he would resort to very severe punishment in order to uphold his authority. "His true religion was to instigate faction litigations."

> In 1971 immediately after Bibesshor's death, the 27 villages *Bhadra Samaj* begun to crumble. The leaders tried to reinforce their authority in the wrong way. They begun to oppress and exploit the simple and poor people. For a relatively small infraction of the village law, they would impose a very high fine and then they would divide the money among themselves. Furthermore, every leader used to keep a concubine or a lover and the people could not object. On the contrary, if any young man and woman would fall in love with each other, they were punished and ostracised from the village. This kind of behaviour was the beginning of the fall of the 27 villages *Bhadra Samaj*. If someone had the courage to complain against such leaders he would be beaten by paid rogues. Every

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45 If anyone trespassed or disregarded some of the social codes (*Samajer niti*), or did not follow the *neta*'s directives, s/he would be ostracised and expelled from the *samaj* (*samajchuta*).

> leader used to have some rogues and 'pimps' at his service. Towards the end there were two leaders called Benikanto and Jotish who were so ill-behaved that even now in Dumuria if someone is up to mischief he is called Beni-Jotish. This is what happened to the 27 village *Samaj*.
>
> Besides that, many of the 27 villages have lost their Rishi population..... and some others are left with two or three families. In Gurudia, where once there were 40/50 families, only two families are left. The same is true for Noakati. My father is from Noakati where we have still got some land, but he moved to Dumuria in 1945. The reason for peoples' migration is that the Muslims are taking away the Rishis' land through cheating. Since the Partition of India in 1947, some of the Rishi leaders, in order to uphold their authority, have established some kind of pact with the Muslims: the latter, with the co-operation of the Rishi leaders, have begun to repossess and seize our land.[46]

Another segment of the Rishi group present in the Dumuria region is the *Sidur Samaj*, whose name derives from their custom of allowing their re-married widows to wear vermilion on the forehead (*Sidur*): " they do not follow all the Hindu traditions and rules, and the Hindu religious law forbids the *Sidur* for re-married widows."[47] The *Sidur Samaj*, supposedly less developed (*anunnata*) than the *Bhadra Samaj*, since they skin the carcasses of dead animals and are involved in traditional 'Muchi' occupations, are organised in groups of 13 villages. Like the *Bhadra Samaj*, they recognise the headmen or *matabbar* for each village and the 5 central *khudra neta*, one of whom acts as *Bara Neta*.

The third segment of the Rishi group, which occupies the last place in this 'internal hierarchy', is the *Hogla Samaj*. The *hogla* is a species of aquatic grass that grows on the river banks and marshy areas and it is used by these Rishi to construct fences, straw mats and the walls of large huts. The *Hogla Samaj* to whom the Dumuria informants refer are mainly found South of Khulna and are ideally organised in a 'confederation of 11 villages'. They are seemingly more illiterate and underdeveloped than the other Rishi and usually live on the rivers' banks or near canals. Their main, almost sole occupation is to skin and collect the hides or bones of dead animals. Although their social structure appears to be more flexible, they seem to have established a vast network of relations with many other Rishi following similar activities.

> When domestic animals die, the owners generally throw the carcasses into the river and these float downstream, but get easily entangled ashore at the confluence of two or more rivers. This is precisely the place where the *Hogla* Rishi live, since they can easily collect the carcasses and get hold of the valued skin.

This division throws some light on the distinction made by Risley between the *chata baghiya* and *bara baghiya* among the Muchi-Rishi (Risley 1891: 96). In Dumuria too, the Rishi recognise a *bara bhage* (*Bhadra Samaj*) to which they themselves belong, and a *chata bhage* (*Sidur* and *Hogla Samaj*). If, apparently, in the past the two groups tended to preserve a strict endogamous unity, more recently this

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46 Interviews among the Dumuria Rishi elders, 15-28 January, 1989.

47 Ibid. The Dumuria informant made clear the distinction between the *Bhadra* and the *Sidur Samaj* in these terms: "Of course even the other Rishi groups tend to support the re-marriage of widows, but they would never allow them to wear the *Sidur*, for the simple reason that the *Sidur* is the sign of the first husband's marriage. The husband himself is the one who first smeared it on the front of the newly-wedded wife. From that day on the wife would wear the *Sidur* everyday until the death of her husband. When the husband dies the elderly of the village would remove the *Sidur* from the forehead of the wife who, in sorrow, is squatting at the feet of her dead husband. From that day on she will never be allowed to wear a *Sidur* on her forehead."

seems to have lessened, given that the efforts made by the Rishi of Dumuria to separate themselves from the rest of the group by adopting 'purer' habits through Brahminization has not been enough to secure them a new status. On the contrary, as the Dumuria Rishi have noticed, this internal divisions have been utilised by caste Hindus and Muslims to weaken the Rishis' position in society as a whole. Apart from the fact that in every Rishi *para*, even of the *BhadraSamaj*, some have always followed the practice of skinning dead animals, the Rishi who attempted Brahminization have only obtained momentary encouragement from the caste Hindus who seemed to believe more in hereditary condition than personal 'redemption'. Furthermore, in later years the Rishi of every sphere, and above all those of the *BhadraSamaj*, dispossessed of their lands and under pressure from a new Muslim presence, had to resort to their old trade. Generally, the Rishi dwellings are no worse than many poor Hindu or Muslim *para*, but they are easily distinguishable when they work as skinners by the hides left outside their houses to dry and the stench emanating from them. A difference can be seen between these and other Rishi *para*, both Hindu and Christian, where some sort of 'purification' process has taken place and the skins are left outside the *para*.

Many factors combined to weaken the alliance of 27, 13 or 11 'villages confederation' which gave strength and consistency to the Rishi when their group identity came under threat: firstly, the partition of India, which excluded many villages along the western border, together with the reduced numbers in the Rishi*para*, because of immigration to India; secondly, the burden placed upon the groups who had to feed the *matabbar* invited for marriages, deaths and *bicar*; thirdly, the division created within the group by the conversion of some to Christianity. Finally, the creation of new roads, canals and railways, that led to the presence of others in the area, contributed further to the division of the 27 *para* into two or more parts.[48]

It should be emphasised that these confederations exist today largely in village memory and it is impossible to know effectively how they functioned in the past. At present the Rishi *paras*, though united by necessity of exchange and mutual protection, feel the pressure around them of the other groups, especially Muslim. Although complete independence and privacy are rarely achievable, only where the Rishi are numerous and under the leadership of a good *matabbar* or, as Christians, protected by local priests and missionaries, can they achieve some autonomy. In such a case the Muslims will try their best to divide the group, to place the leaders in competition with one another and to interfere with the life of the group at every level, until they can demonstrate that it is they who are needed to solve the Rishis' problems.

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48 For instance, after the construction of the railway from Jessore to Calcutta, the Rishi group of 27 villages in that area was split into two groups, 13 para north of the railway, and the other 14 south of it.

Land ownership and occupation (TABLE3)

Following Jahangir, who justifies the use of land as a common denominator and a "proxi indicator of the level of living in rural area" to identify the rural poor, we can establish that land in this region "is also a source of power and prestige ... and so the holding of land better reflects one's socio-economic position".[49] In Dumuria Rishi *para* only 13 families out of 165 possess some arable land (*abadi jami*) amounting in total to 85 *bigha*,[50] and among these families, two possess 30 *bigha* each.[51] The remaining 152 families (92.12%) do not own arable land, and among them, 7 families live on rented land. Comparing these data with Jahangir's survey it can be established that only a minority of 2.48% of the Dumuria Rishi are above the poverty line of 2.0 acres.

Usually the Rishi prefer not to work their own land but to let it in *barga* (sharecrop). None of those who possess land work it themselves, and rarely do the Rishi agree to work the land of others, not only because "in Bangladesh society, manual labour especially on others' account is considered degrading" (Jahangir 1980: 11), but also because they lack the skills of this trade. In only one homestead out of 165 do they work as farmers and in another four as daily labourers in the field. This is also due to the fact that, even if Dumuria Rishi *para* can be considered only partially a rural area, the Rishi in general have lost the battle in competing with others over land ownership, which in one way or other still gives power, security and prestige.

The remaining 160 *paribar* follow a variety of occupations which reflect to a large extent the activity of the *Jati*: 51 work as *juta palis* (shoe-shiners), mainly in the city of Khulna and in the market places around the area. The second largest group are the *kuli* or porters represented by 30 homesteads. The next group is that of the rattan and cane (*cac* and *bet*) workers who number 28 families. While only nine homesteads work as skinners, seven families are skin dealers. A further nine families, the majority of them headed by a widow, earn their living working in rice-mills (*mile cauljhara*). Seven families are sustained by wage-earners (*cakuri*) and among these are the two families with the largest amount of land in the *para* possessing 30 bigha each. A further four homesteads are daily labourers (*din mujuri*); four families are supported by 'van'[52] drivers (*bhan calak*); three homesteads earn their living through some sort of commerce (*bepsa*); another three work as cobblers and four families run a shoe shop (*jutar*

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49 Jahangir 1980: 9. After demonstrating that the "poorer people have better access to land in this area", Jahangir establishes, not without recognising the difficulties, that "the people owning up to 2.0 acres can be taken as the target group as they are so poor as to depend on manual labour on others' account to a significant extent" (Ibid.: 11).

50 The *Bigha* is a land measurement corresponding to 0.33 of an acre.

51 Of the remaining 11 families, one family has 6 bigha, two families have 4 bigha each, one family has six bigha , six families have 2 bigha, two families have one bigha each and the other two families have 1/2 bigha each.

52 The name '*van*' is applied all over Bangladesh to a sort of tricycle with cart used to transport goods and people.

dokan). Only one homestead maintains itself as drum-makers (*khol tabla*). Three beggars (*bhikkha*) are also present in the *para*.

Analysing the statistics in TABLE 3, Roghunath Das deduced that by Bangladeshi village standards 7 families in the Rishi *para* of Dumuria are rich, 6 are well-off, 31 are above average, 103 are average and 18, including the beggars, are poor. Despite this seemingly satisfactory picture, the majority suffer malnutrition, leading to disease: 73% of the children suffer from dysentery (*amasay*), vermin (*krmi*), and stomach disorders, leading to premature death, and raising considerably the death rate of the *para*.

Activities associated with skinning

The statistics above relate only to the primary trade of the Rishi households. Many with no fixed job, and more or less self-employed, were found to be pursuing a variety of occupations, which enabled them to live when their primary service was not required. Among the alternative occupations the skinning of dead animals occupies a prominent place. Even though only 45% of them are directly involved with leather work, and only 20 -25 families skin cows on a regular basis, skinning is practised throughout the year by two-thirds of the population.

The commercial side of this trade, as we have already seen, is in the hands of seven families, who are among the wealthiest in the *para*. However, when the many shoe shiners and the *kuli*, who constitute almost half of the Rishi population, find jobs scarce, they resort to skinning. The same applies to the 28 homesteads dependent on bamboo-cane work, who are among the poorest in the village community[53] and, as a last expedient, resort to the skinning trade. The alternative is to sell their land and other belongings so that they are gradually divested of all their possessions and ruined. This also explains why, in the past, many more people in this area working in the bamboo-cane trade either changed profession, moved further south or emigrated to India.

Significantly, the majority of the Rishi in Dumuria engage in shoe shining, which places them at the bottom of the social scale, yet leaves them independent from others and above all, not in competition with them, since nobody else would stop to engage in such an activity. The same is true of skinning, where there is also no question of competition, for market forces determine the demand for skins and hides. The real profit in this trade, however, is made by moneylenders and leather factories. It seems that the poisoning of cows, for which the Rishi have always been blamed, has declined in this

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53 Their articles are not a daily necessity but seasonal goods. Furthermore, the market for bamboo-cane work is controlled by the rich who sell the raw material to the Rishi at high prices and buy the finished product at a low price. According to my Rishi informants, it is difficult to support their families and often they have no food or eat only once a day.

area. However, if the price of skins and hides increases on the local market, the number of dead cows is also likely to increase.

Mara Mamsa (Carrion meat)

Skinning is often associated with eating carrion meat and this is a reality in Dumuria:

> Those of us who skin animals (*camra kata*) go to the bazaar with blood-smeared skin wrapped in cloth, carried on the heads with the blood flowing freely down all over the body. Some even eat the carrion meat of dead cows and bring this into the bazaar along with the skin. The aversion of others to this is very normal. I clearly remember an incident which happened to me personally. Together with some friends, we were seated in a 'restaurant' when I was suddenly asked : "I have noticed that your people, when skinning dead animals, also cut off some of the carrion meat. Do any of you eat this meat?" I almost lost my senses, then one of my friends answered: "No, they just sell the cow fat to the local factory." But the questioner continued, "He didn't just take the fat, I clearly saw him take meat as well." I then added that such meat was fed to the pigs..... Almost half the people of the area skin cows and eat carrion. It is dangerous to forbid them to do this. My friends and I have tried to forbid this practice but we received threats...

My informant is clearly sympathetic with the "others' " vision of reality, and his position represents a point of view shared by some Rishi who want to change the public image of the group. He describes his attempts to conceal the practice from outsiders and to stop it among the Rishi, and concludes by identifying with the view of the other: it is the Rishis' own fault that they are *asprsya*, untouchable.

Barna-Boisamya (Caste discrimination)

By labelling themselves as *Bhadra samaj*, the Rishi of Dumuria are trying to gain what are considered as the important values in society at large: honour-equality (*man-samman*) and good standing (*pratipotti*). These values helped them to build up self-respect (*demag*) and pride of lineage (*bamsa*). On these bases, in the past and still today, marriage alliances have been carried out, and through ex-communication (*samajcyuta kara*) the community safeguards its 'purity', as when two people wish to marry despite being blood-related (*attiya-samparka*).

According to my Rishi informants the *Bhadra samaj* of Dumuria, separating themselves from the *Sidur* and *Hogla samaj*, seek to achieve unity with the rest of society (caste Hindu and Muslims). However,

> ... they (*Bhadra samaj*) do not understand that it is the *uccu* (high) *dharma* of the Brahman group which will never give us the right (*dabi*) to be Hindus. As a consequence we will remain untouchable (*asprsya*) and never will we be able to wipe away this filth (*mayla*).... As a result of this self-conceit, arrogance and pride of lineage today, the Dumuria Rishi are in different matters underdeveloped as compared to the Rishi of other areas....

The majority of the Dumuria Rishi are of the opinion that Muslims and Hindus hate (*ghrna kara*) their *jati* ; whereas the Muslims admit that the Rishi from a social viewpoint are in some way like other men ("that we too are a *jati*") the caste Hindus "hate us only because we affirm that we too are

humans (*amrao je manus*)". Their struggle to be acknowledged as persons (*manus*) is manifested through a series of actions embracing all spheres - social, economic, political and religious - that constitute for the Rishi one and the same reality, the place where they try to affirm their identity and be accepted as *manus*.

Until recently the Dumuria Rishi could not drink tea in tea stalls and the barber would refuse to serve them, on the basis that other customers would be lost. Although they resorted, like the Rishi of other areas, to going to places where they were not recognised, they understood that this was no solution to their problem and adjusted to the situation, accepting for instance that separate cups and glasses were kept for them in the local tea stalls.

The next stage for the Rishi was the process of learning to negotiate with local politicians and influential people. They eventually realised that their participation in the local elections could shift the balance of votes from one candidate to another. Initially they were interested in pursuing benefits which would not substantially change their position in society, but more recently they have forced the issue of being recognised as *manus*. Their own words illustrate the different levels of their demands:

> Last year (1987) we celebrated a *puja* and we invited Colonel Gaphar, Kaji Gahatar, to our religious feast, along with many political leaders, other important local Hindus and representatives of the Hindu *samaj*. At the feast only two per cent of those invited turned up. During this celebration we ourselves prepared the tea and served the betel leaf and different kinds of sweetmeats. The 'serving' was done by the most neglected strata of the Rishi *para*. I had previously asked Kaji Gahatar for advice on this and we agreed that Kaji himself would eat the served sweetmeats and drink the tea first. Consequently, so as not to be shamed, all those present would have to eat something. However a *thakur* (Hindu elder) said that he only drank black tea and hence would not drink the *ilked* tea. After some consultation, we prepared a cup of black tea for him, so that he was obliged to drink. In this and similar ways our *asprsyata* (untouchability) has been lessened a little....

At present, many Hindu religious organisations accept the Dumuria Rishi and some among them are permitted to enter the *puja-mandab*.[54] With many caste Hindus migrating to India, those remaining were in need of the support of all other Hindus, including the Rishi. The greater openness of the caste Hindus towards 'Untouchables' lies also in the fact that the Namasudra, the largest caste in Bengal, have worked their way up the social scale and only a few today would define them as the 'Untouchable *Candala* '. Finally, many Rishi are striving to improve the condition of the group through education, sanitation, health care, diet and the renunciation of skinning. The partial results obtained by the Dumuria Rishi can, however, be ascribed more to their negotiation with Hindu political leaders than to the good-will of the Hindu *samaj* as such, to accept them into their fold.

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54 Dialect for *puja math* (inner sanctum).

The Rishi and the Muslim majority

The Muslims of Dumuria, made strong by the presence of immigrants from outside, have, over the last four decades, acquired more power and influence. The exercise of this power has resulted in loss of land for the Rishi.[55] It would seem that the Muslims have either bought or taken possession of 65% of the Rishis' land, and done so in a way described by the Rishi as *agrasan* (aggression). This *agrasan* is still in operation with the Muslims still attempting to obtain the remaining Rishi land. The use of this English term can be seen as a reminder, both for the Rishi and the Muslims, of a recent colonial past.

Agrasan is exercised not only over land, but has become a 'style' of relationship between Muslims and Rishi in other spheres of life, and needs to be analysed to better understand the Rishis' perception of their own situation. Four methods of *agrasan* were described to me by Rishi informants:

1. Those with a little land are regularly visited by a Muslim until a *bhai-bon* (brother-sister) relationship is established. As proof of this a loan of 10 or 20,000 Taka is made to the Rishi *bari* (homestead) and a blank stamped paper is signed as collateral for the loan. In a very short time this paper becomes the official document of land transaction. If the land is in the name of a Rishi widow or divorced woman, the operation is even quicker: after establishing an illicit relationship (*aboidha samparka*), the Muslims take advantage of this intimacy (*khatir*), and have the land registered in their name, breaking off all contact afterwards.

2. The second method is to resort to the service of rowdies (*mastan*) and gangsters (*gunda*), supported by local leaders, who take possession of Rishi land. If some land is owned by several co-sharers, after taking one plot by force, the Muslims then start a fight with the remaining co-sharers who, unable to sustain a losing battle, eventually sell their land at a very low price and emigrate elsewhere, mostly to India. In 1990 the Rishi families present in Dumuria numbered 146, but it is said that less than fifteen years ago more than 250 families were living there.

3. The third tactic is to foment fragmentation (*daladali*) within the Rishi *para*. If a difficulty arises between two parties, a Muslim *kaka* (uncle)[56] acts as a representative for each and initiates a case against the other in the police station over a land dispute. In this way the two contending parties remain tied up and, with all their other possessions sold, are finally compelled to sell the contested land to the Muslims.

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55 As we have already seen, after the Partition of India and even later, many Muslim immigrants settled in Khulna and Jessore Districts, and since they were essentially agriculturists, land was required for their residence and livelihood.

56 The paternal Uncle (*kaka*) is a widely recognised figure in Bengali culture as the counsellor and mediator in family disputes and, as such, the name is used also in a figurative sense.

4. The fourth method of *agrasan* is illustrated by Roghunath Das' statement about the influential Muslims (*bara lok*) of the area:

> The Muslims are very shrewd, educated and intelligent...On the outside the Muslim is humble, polite, diplomatic, serving the community, and pious... However, on the inside he can be very nasty. Given the chance, they will extort (*sosan*), not only from the Rishi, but also from other low caste people and poor Muslims too. They are so cunning that speaking with them, it is almost impossible to believe that they harm others; they give you the impression of willingness to give up their life for the welfare of others.
>
> They never do anything themselves, but with their shrewd means are able to command all the power needed to solve a problem in their favour: the police, the Union chairman, members and officers, the court, laws and matters pertaining to justice ...are all in their power. Through their servile henchmen they oppress (*attacar kara*) the poor and the Rishi, and yet carry out judgements (*bicar*): whenever the police hear that the well-to-do leaders are judging an issue, they do not even take part. They always uphold the importance of reaching a compromise (*mitano*), but secretly merely instigate and reinforce oppression against the exploited poor and the Rishi. As a result, the Rishi are no longer able to tolerate this situation of injustice. Impossible for us to be judged fairly or to dispute the judgements of influential people, some of us try to leave the area, after selling land and properties. The said influential people, having transferred the land nominally to another person, eventually register it in their own name.

One of the tactics described by my informants used by the 'influential people' to take over a Rishi *para*, is the manipulation of the Rishi youth. By fraternising with them, the influential Muslims obtain from them whatever they desire. It appears that one such leader even managed to gain possession of all land documents in the Rishi *para* : "This means that, in the palm of his hand, he held the map of the Rishi *para* , and was ready to swallow it up."

The oppression the Rishi have to endure at the hands of such individuals is intensified by the geographical division created in the Rishi *para*. Having always been a unity, even from an administrative point of view, it has been divided more recently, with the possibility of free elections, into three different sections, so that the Rishi can never elect their representatives. New names have been given to the three sections of the one divided *para*: Araji Dumuria, Araji Sajiyara, and Golna, registered under three different voting centres. In this way the Rishi, who might have stood a good chance of having at least two members in the Union Council and one strong contender for the chairmanship, are completely cut out of the political scene of the area. "In a future not too distant, no Rishi child will be able to hold their head up high; meanwhile the politicians, unperturbed, have been allowed to rest peacefully in the certainty of a split vote in the Rishi *para*."

Some temporary conclusions can be reached from analysing the relationship of the Rishi with the caste Hindus and the Muslims. Firstly, the Rishis' oppression touches every sphere of their life. What would appear a 'ritual' segregation, in their relationship with the Hindus, is in fact extended to social, political, educational and territorial segregation. Their separation from the rest of the Rishi group, the *Sidur* and *Hogla samaj*, and their belonging to the *Bhadra Samaj*, does not directly help to improve their position: it remains more an advantage for the caste Hindus and the Muslims, who can exercise better control over them. On the other hand, their negotiations with the Hindu political leaders has brought them some official recognition of their identity as *manus*. This remains a purely theoretical exercise,

however, if it is not then followed by a concrete implementation of this identity in other spheres of their life. Secondly, it can be affirmed that, though the caste Hindus and the Muslims start from diverse standpoints, both in fact have the same aim: control over the Rishi group. Efforts made by some caste Hindus to counteract this are not followed by the majority and, in any case, should this be so, they are in no position to dictate the terms of compromise to the Muslim majority. The Muslims, for their part, do not apparently share the caste ideology of the Hindus, but make use of it whenever convenient. Finally, the Rishis' internal division and lack of leadership favour those seeking to take advantage of the group. As is evident from our examination of the methods of *agrasan*, the influential Muslims are helped in their violations by Rishi youth, who look to solving their problems on an individual level.

3. The experience of 'Untouchability'

A History of 'Untouchability'

Different terms were used during British rule in India to identify those sections of society which suffered certain 'disabilities': 'depressed classes', 'exterior classes', 'outcastes' and 'backward classes', being the most common. The English term 'untouchable', which came into use around 1909,[57] forced its way through political events.[58] Many reformers had been interested, from the early years of the nineteenth century, in the social uplift of the so-called 'depressed classes', but "after 1901, fear of diminished Hindu majorities and proposal for special legislative representation for these classes propelled 'untouchability' from the realm of philanthropy into the political arena...." (Galanter 1984: 122). In spite of the fact that Ambedkar and R. Srinivasan proposed alternative names such as 'Non-Caste Hindus', 'Protestant Hindus', or 'Non-conformist Hindus',[59] to substitute for the "degrading and contemptuous term 'Depressed Classes'",[60] the latter remained the official term up until 1935, when the Government of India Act, "denoted those who would enjoy the special electoral arrangements for untouchables as 'Scheduled Castes', a term destined to remain the official designation for untouchables down to the present" (Galanter 1984: 34). The term 'Harijan' [literally 'the sons of Hari-the God'] used by Gandhi, became popular for some time, but was disliked by 'untouchable' leaders.[61] Apart from "the political opposition by Ambedkar and his followers to Gandhi's approach to solve the problem of untouchability" (Kananaikil 1986: 91), the name was not accepted by the educated 'ex-untouchables', who classified it as "a bad word introduced by Mahatma Gandhi".[62]

It has been noted that the 'Scheduled Caste' category, is "the most recent of a long line of official euphemisms for 'untouchables' ", since it "is intended to comprise those groups isolated and

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57 "Use of the English 'untouchable' in print can be traced with fair precision to the year 1909. The Maharaja of Baroda in his remarks to the Depressed Classes Mission of Bombay on October 18, 1909, uses the term and provides an explanation to his audience..... The abstract form 'untouchability' is used by Sridar V. Ketkar (1909: 86) in a footnote to his study of the caste system...." (Galanter 1984: 25n).

58 When the Indian Muslims were granted special electorates, after the promulgation of the Minto-Morley reforms, "... the problem of the lowest castes was for the first time conceptualized under the rubric of 'untouchability' - a general term which opened the possibility of visualizing the problem not as a congeries of depressed groups, but as a stratum of all-India dimension with shared characteristics" (Ibid.).

59 Indian Round Table Conference 1932: 76.

60 "Gradually, in the official documents, the use of the term 'depressed classes' came to be restricted to refer primarily to those who were subjected to untouchability" (Kananaikil 1986: 90).

61 "In 1936, at the All India Depressed Classes Conference held at Lucknov, about 90 delegates from different parts of the country who represented the 'untouchable' groups, openly declared their opposition to using this term (St. Mary's College 1931-37: 87)" (Kananaikil 1986: 91).

62 "... In Hindi it [Harijan] means a boy whose father's name is unknown, hence 'children of God'. In the Hindu temples there were, as you know, the *devadasis*, the girls who took part in worship ceremonies and also served the priests. Sometimes they gave birth to children and these children were called 'Harijan'. That is why we don't like the name" (quoted in Isaacs 1964: 41).

disadvantaged by their 'untouchability' "(Galanter 1984: 122).[63] Even though this category does certainly recall old and recent disabilities and stigmatised occupations, it still represents "a new legal identity, at this juncture, in itself non-discriminatory compared to the earlier ones like 'untouchables' and 'outcastes' "(Kananaikil 1986: 91). An ever-growing number of 'ex-Untouchables' in India today have decided to repudiate all labels previously imposed on them by politicians and social scientists and now call themselves '*Dalits*'. This term, meaning 'the oppressed', "popularised by Untouchable protest movements since the early 1970s, ... has become a positive, assertive expression of pride in Untouchable heritage and a rejection of oppression" (Joshi 1986: 3). This self-definition and the discovery of a *Dalit* culture represent a new step in the history of 'Untouchables' who, by re-reading history from their standpoint and taking the future into their own hands, seem determined to refuse any patronising attitude of Caste Hindus and others.

The 1931 Census Report of Bengal classified the 'Muchi', together with another forty-seven 'Depressed Classes', as 'Untouchables'. In this same Statement it is also shown that the 'Muchi' were classified as a 'Depressed Class' in the List of Bengal Government, 1916, the Calcutta University Report, 1917-19, and the Census Report of 1921.[64] Previously, in the 1911 Census Report, the 'Muchi' had been grouped with other 58 'castes or tribes', subject to certain religious disabilities.[65] The problematic raised by this Census[66] - i.e. the grouping of the 'low castes' as Hindus - was not resolved despite clarifications,[67] and this controversy, which for the first time became an important political issue (Zelliot 1969:141), enables us to focus on the place of the Rishi within the Hindu *samaj* and the real nature of their 'Untouchability'. From the Census' data it can be deduced that, at that time, the Rishi were 'Untouchables' because of their 'uncleanliness', which caused 'pollution'. The source of this pollution must be attributed, in their case, to the fact that they "eat beef and do not revere the cow",

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63 "... Just as 'Harijan' fossilizes the evangelical fervour of Gandhi's anti-untouchability campaigns, so 'Scheduled Castes' summons up the bureaucratic rigidification and torpor that overtook Ambedkar's measures for secular improvement" (Galanter 1984: 34n).

64 *Census of India, 1931, Bengal and Sikkim*, Report, vol.V Part I:502.

65 "They....
1.....Do not receive the *mantra* from a Brahman or other recognised Hindu Guru.
2..... Are not served by good Brahmans as family priests.
3.....Have no Brahman priests at all.
4..... Are denied access to the interior of ordinary Hindu temples.
5..... Cause pollution, by touch or within a certain distance.
6.....Eat beef and do not revere the cow..." (emphasis added).
The disabilities not attributed to the Muchi are as follows: They "1. .....deny the supremacy of the Brahamns. 2. ..... Deny the authority of the Vedas. 3. ..... Do not worship the great Hindu gods. 4. ..... Bury their dead" *(Census of India, 1911, Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and Sikkim*, Report, vol.V, Part I: 232-33).

66 The Census Commissioner decided "... that, instead of raising the question whether the members of particular castes should be regarded as Hindus, or not, a list should be prepared of the castes and tribes,....returned and classed as Hindus, which *qua* castes do not conform to certain standards or are subject to certain disabilities" (Ibid.).

67 "At Gaya, certain castes, known as Patit Hindus, viz., Chamars, Dhobis, Doms and Muchis, are not allowed to enter the Vishnupad temple or the Akshayavata shrine when performing *sraddha*, though they may make offerings at other *vedis*. Briefly, the low castes are excluded from the temples simply because they are unclean castes and not because they are not Hindus" (emphasis added, ibid.: 229).

with other disabilities a mere consequence of the last ones. They were nevertheless considered Hindus, even though 'fallen ones' (*patit*). It seems that the Caste Hindus were preoccupied with getting 'clean votes' from 'polluted voters'.

Apparently, different stages in the early history of Untouchables can be proved from literary sources (Jha 1977: 14-31), and though during Vedic period up to circa 600 B.C., the *Candala* were "manifest objects of spite and abhorrence", they were not treated as 'Untouchables'. It was in the second phase (up to circa 200 A.D.) that pollution became 'a potent reality'.[68] With Manusmrti, segregation becomes more complete: the *Candala* is forbidden entry into the village during night and he is defined a corpse-carrier, an executioner of criminals, a hunter and butcher. Other 'mixed-castes' associated with him are hunters, bamboo-workers, basket makers, drummers and leather workers (all activities currently practised by the Rishi).[69] With the third phase (up to circa 600 A.D.) we find for the first time the term *asprsya* used by the lawgiver Visnu,[70] but it is in the fourth and final phase (up to circa 1200 A.D. and beyond), that untouchability reaches its peak and, ".... beef-eaters (*gavasanah*) are for the first time dubbed as untouchables".[71]

Jha's historical analysis, based on texts, throws some light on our understanding of the Rishis' position since they nowadays follow many of the 'polluting' activities with which the groups referred to above were associated. Even though we should consider that "a taboo did not automatically and immediately make a group untouchable..." (Jha 1977: 29), we are still puzzled by the succession of events in considering whether a group was made untouchable by a certain polluting activity or whether, the said polluting activity was suggested or recommended to a group already made untouchable.[72]

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68 "...(T)he notion of pollution becomes a potent reality and is seen in full play with respect to the Candala, whose untouchability is not left in any doubt...The commensal and connubial taboos in relation to the Candala become severe and absolute...Segregation was the natural corollary to the ardently preached and widely shared belief in pollution..." (Jha 1977: 15).

69 "Manifestly the taboo associated with death, the most horrible experience of life, and the connection of the Candala and allied sections with it, downgraded them to the lowest social level" (Ibid.: 19).

70 This is the exact Sanskrit word for 'Untouchable', but only Katyayana "is the first lawgiver to use *asprsya* in the definite sense of untouchables" (Ibid.: 21).

71 "According to Parasara, he [the Candala] embodies in his person all varieties of pollution for a twice-born..... The Candala is for the first time represented as infecting the highway by his treading..... The Svapaka....has an equal low social standing. Vaikhanasa recommends for him the profession of dealing in hides and armour or armour made of hides, which shows his probable connection with the dead cattle... Surely beef-eating becomes a distinguishing trait of large sections of untouchables from this period onwards...." (Emphasis added - Ibid.: 24-28).

72 "....apparently immense backwardness, resistance to the process of conquest and Hinduization and geographical factors may have thwarted full absorption of certain indigenous sections in Hindu society and eventually pushed them to the position of untouchables..." (Ibid.: 30).

In a recent article, Jha (1986-7)[73] concludes that the 'Untouchability' of the *Candala* "developed out of the notion of pollution" and "their [Candalas'] low ritual ranking in the existing hereditary *jati* framework of social stratification corresponded to the prevailing uneven distribution of wealth and power and their own deplorable material conditions". In opposition to Dumont, Jha recognises "power and status" as broadly coinciding, so that "materially, the upper *varnas* .... were in a position to withdraw more and more from primary productive activities and to look down upon manual work and those engaged in it."[74]

Jha's critique, from a historical viewpoint, of Dumont's position "and the elaboration of the basic principle of purity and pollution as its central idea", enables us to enter into a debate which proves essential for our understanding of the Rishis' position in today's Bangladeshi society.[75] Our concern, at this point, is directed at examining 'untouchability' as 'an idea and a social reality' in the Rishis' everyday experience, and to assess their own understanding of 'untouchability'. This will eventually lead to a discovery of their self-perception, as well as the understanding of others, Muslims, caste Hindus and missionaries, who are in dialogue-negotiation with them.

'Untouchability' was officially abolished in India under Article 17 of the Constitution[76], and Article 15 (2) of the 'Untouchability (Offence) Act of 1955.[77] To this abolition *de jure* there does not correspond an abolition *de facto*, and official reports[78] give evidence of the perpetuation of this

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73 In this article Jha reiterates the low position of the Candala and other groups associated with them in the post-Vedic phase ("which coincided with the stabilization and consolidation of the caste system"). The Dharmasutras, for instance, treat the Candalas "as subhuman beings and frequently dovetail them with dogs and crows". As a result, a series of severe regulations and restrictions prohibits others from any sort of contact with them and the notion of pollution "is seen in full play in respect of the Candala".
"The lawgivers' unmistakable objective behind these prescriptions is to keep the Candalas at a distance from the settled Aryan population and to prohibit physical contact with them as completely as possible. Terms like *anta, antya, antyayoni, antyavasayin* and *bahya*, used in a precise sense and applied to Candalas and allied sections attest their effective segregation as a natural corollary to the ardently preached and widely shared notion of pollution and its actual practice vis-à-vis the Candalas" (Jha 1986-7: 7).

74 "... the elaboration of *varna* and *jati* ideology, of which untouchability as an idea and social reality formed an integral part, during the period went hand in hand with the hardening and deterioration of class relations; the higher degree of absorption and integration of the Candalas and the other backward aboriginal groups in the dominant socio-economic set-up meant further dependence, exploitation and disabilities" (Ibid.: 34).

75 "Dumont's denial of the nature of caste as an extreme form of social stratification or as an extreme case of class in spite of the sanction of subordination and exploitation of lower castes like the Candalas under the traditional caste system and the institutionalization of taboos of touch, association, commensality, connubium, etc., in relation to them only after the emergence of acute differences in the distribution of economic and political power in post-Vedic times does definite violence to known historical facts" (Ibid.: 35).

76 Indian Constitution, Art. 17: "Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of Untouchability shall be an offence punishable in accordance with the law."

77 See: 'The Untouchability (Offence) Act', Art. 15 (2), introduced in the Lok Shaba on 15 March, 1955: " No citizen shall on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, restriction or condition with regard to (a) access to shops, public restaurants, hotel and places of public entertainment; or (b) the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of state funds or dedicated to the use of the general public."

78 Cf. *Government of India*, Department of Social Welfare. 'Report of the Committee on Untouchability, Economic and Educational Development of the Scheduled Castes and Connected Documents', 1969.

practice.[79] The Constitution of Bangladesh,[80] stating the equality of all citizens, solves the problem by ignoring it completely, and rightly so, since one of the reasons which led to the creation of Pakistan was the problem of Untouchability and its solution.

A Memorandum published in 1985 by the "Bangladesh Scheduled Castes' Federation",[81] directed to the President of the country, states that 1/5 of the total population of Bangladesh belong to this group. There are listed 77 different "Minority communities and Backward classes - Scheduled castes" among whom figure also the 'Muchi' (Rishi). The central theme of the Memorandum is a vindication of past concessions made by previous Governments to the Scheduled Castes,[82] longing for the old times when these were 'recognised' and regretting the new situation of 'democracy and equality'.[83] However, the Memorandum, in its naive vindications and further recommendations, reveals the status of a large section of the Bangladesh community, for whom the old 'Untouchability' still means "destitution, segregation and exploitation".

The Rishis' Untouchability as seen by Others

Only a few Rishi have recently learned about the existence of a "Scheduled Castes' Federation", which fights against disabilities and 'Untouchability'. Their experience is more of an ongoing daily reality, when the rest of society, Hindus and Muslims alike, remind them of their place. All the Rishi *para* are located on the outskirts of the villages or completely separated from them. The Rishis' place in the bazar is at the far end. They are not served in tea stalls or hotels, and if they need a hair-cut they have to go where they are unknown. They do not normally participate in the Hindu *samaj* religious festivals, and if they do, it is only as spectators or drummers. They have no commensality with other

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79 " The passing of laws is one thing, their effective execution another. Ever since The Untouchability (Offences) Act, 1955, there have been complaints both from inside the parliament and from social activists in the field about the ineffective functioning of the law" (Kananaikil 1986:94).

80 "All citizens are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection of law" (*Constitution of the Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh*, Art. 27). "No citizen shall on ground only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth be subjected to any disability, liability restriction or condition with regard to access to any place of public entertainment or resort, or admission to any education institution" (Ibid.: Art 28/3).

81 " To His Most Excellent President and Major General of the Republic of Bangladesh Government - Memorandum", *Bangladesh Scheduled Castes' Federation*, Dhaka 11-10-1985.

82 Such as the 1935 Indian Act, (reservation of seats in the Legislative Assembly), the arrangements made in the 1954 elections (on the bases of reserving seats for the Scheduled Castes), the Constitution of 1956 (where concessions were granted for the improvement of the Scheduled Castes and a special officer was appointed to improve their education), etc...

83 " It is a thing of regret that in Independent, Sovereign Bangladesh, all the facilities destined to the improvement of the Scheduled Castes have disappeared for some unknown reason. But in gaining the independence and sovereignty, their sacrifice and participation is known to all" (Ibid.).

groups and when they receive food in exchange for daily labour, a banana leaf is used as a plate;[84] money received in payment is thrown at their feet. They are a strictly endogamous group and contract marriages within a range of five to twenty-five miles. The name 'Muchi', used as a disparaging form of address, is often reinforced by expressions of disgust, and sometimes by the name 'Chamar'. They are commonly associated with the *sakun*, the vulture which feeds on carrion, and their dead are not accepted in the caste Hindus' burning grounds.

The villagers of south-west Bangladesh, both caste Hindus and Muslims, refer to the Rishis' 'untouchability' by defining them as an *asuci* (impure) or *mayla* (dirty) *jat*. Rarely, if ever, do learned people address them as *asprsya*. The Rishis' impurity is associated with their occupation as skinners, leather workers, basket-makers, drum-players, musicians etc... Furthermore, they eat beef and carrion. Thus, villagers synthesise in '*asucita*' the Rishis' actions which determine this impurity: *mara choya* (handling dead animals), *mara khaoya* (eating carrion) and *mayla thaka* (living in dirt) (Paggi 1985-1990: 18). These are not, however, mere classifications but they are accompanied by feelings of rejection and physical reaction by Hindu and Muslim villagers towards the Rishi and their environment.

I am not implying here that the solution of the whole problem is left to the obsolete 'purity-impurity' dichotomy. On the other hand, neither am I suggesting that the Hindu Bengali *samaj* is a fixed reality; what I would like to underline is that change and mobility are more evident and persuasive in history and in human activity rather than in applying the *triguna* theory to ranking ideology (cf. Davis 1976). The shift, for instance, that occurred when many caste Hindus emigrated to India leaving behind in East Pakistan, especially in the south-western bordering regions, a caste Hindu minority in need of new alliances with the 'Untouchables', certainly opened doors for the 'Untouchables', as we have seen in the Dumuria case. This change, slow as it may be, has led to a process of democratisation and secularization in which political interests supersede other theories of rank. In the case of the Rishi of South-West Bangladesh, secular progress has been held back by their minority situation, but the Namasudra, the former Bengali *Candala*, have not only raised their status, but now represent one of the strongest Hindu communities in Bangladesh. The Rishi, as long as they remain an internally divided minority, are destined to serve most of the time on the bottom rung of the ladder, under the Sudras and those other 'ex-Untouchables' who have gained a certain respectability; for "Bengalis hold that only the Brahman and Sudra *varna* are indigenous to Bengali society" (Davis 1976: 12) and, in south-west Bangladesh, both justify their non-*tamasik* or less-*tamasik* position by opposition to the Rishi.

The situation peculiar to the Rishi emerges clearly in the attitude of the Muslim majority towards them. Apparently some Muslims are ready to 'share a meal with the Rishi' once these "stop eating

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84 Manusmrti X.54 attests that the food to a *Candala* must be given in broken dishes.

kukadda [lit. bad-food, referring to carrion] and learn to keep their dwelling places clean...".[85] This fact would seem to support Davis' theory, but to the neglect of other factors. What Davis says about the Hindu Bengalis when assessing their ideology about food and food exchange, and the relation between food and blood (*rakta*), can also be applied to the Muslims of this area.[86] It was reported to me that a Rishi of the Chuknagar area had decided to become Muslim. Great importance was given to this event which was highly publicised by the Muslim leaders. On the day of the acceptance ceremony into the *Umma*, when all were assembled, a young learned Muslim challenged the leaders asking them: "You are happy to accept this man and his family, but are you willing to give your sons and daughters in marriage to his?". Apparently all left and never again did they speak of accepting Rishi into their *samaj*.

Undoubtedly *tamasik* for the Hindus has a different connotation and a more extensive application than for the Muslims. The result, however, is one and the same when applied to the Rishi or to other 'low *jati* ' groups. In the Tala-Chuknagar area, for instance, groups such as the Behara and the Dai (palanquin bearers and oil pressers),[87] who are former 'Untouchables', did not cease to be treated as such by the other members of their Muslim community after converting to Islam. They do not interdine or intermarry with the other Muslims, and often are not permitted to enter the Mosque. This last fact, which could be ascribed to the very low economic condition and the poor sense of hygiene of the two groups, suggests a certain ideology of '*tamasik* qualities' resulting in 'ritual pollution' attributed to them by the rest of the Muslim community.[88]

The literature which discusses the possible presence of a 'caste system' among Muslims (and other religious groups) in South Asia, is abundant (see Ahmad 1978; 1981). Without entering into this debate, we nevertheless need to understand the ideology of rural Bengali Muslims who, at least in this part of Bangladesh, apparently support the practice of 'Untouchability'. Even though "the proximity of the Hindu environment" (Dumont 1980: 270) has played an important role in the formation of this ideology, we prefer to look at a "much wider set of ideas about society and the world ..... held by ordinary people", in contrast to the "theological values" held only by a minority. Islam - and

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85 Paggi 1985-90:18. The *mara choya*, *mara khayoa*, and *mayla thaka* emphasis is shared by Hindus and Muslims alike in relation to the Rishi.

86 For Muslims also "to give or receive boiled rice [*bhat khabar* = to eat rice together] is thus more important than to exchange any other kind of food; for the exchange of boiled rice implies a greater intimacy and willingness to have one's own blood, the transmitter of all that is distinctive of a birth group, affected" (Davis 1976: 22).

87 "Behara [is] a title of Hindu caste such as Bagdis, Bauris, Chandals. . . . and others who are employed as palanquin bearers also of Dhaws or low Mohamedans who follow the same occupation" (Risley 1891: 85).
"Dai. . . [are] normally Muslim or Hindu of the Chamar caste" (Risley 1891: 210).

88 Bhattacharya, discussing caste ideology among the Muslims of West Bengal, claims that the emphasis placed by the higher groups on cleanliness and a sense of hygiene forms the reasons for their not wanting to eat with Nomins, Patnas and Shahs, an attitude which stems from their 'ritual' considerations. " In reality, - he adds - they have a concept of ritual purity and pollution" (Bhattacharya 1978: 291).
"... In practice, many of the caste observances such as pollution of food and drink, restriction of interdining, intermarriage, are followed by Muslims of Rural Bengal [West Bengal - 24 Parganas]" (Guha 1965: 168).

Christianity for that matter - is, in principle, an egalitarian religion, although this 'orthodoxy' has not always been followed by the corresponding 'orthopraxy' (Fuller 1976: 66). The 'identity' of the Bengali Muslims has been, and still is, a matter of much concern among South Asian scholars (cf. Ahmed 1981; Abecassis 1990). From the "contemptuous rejection of everything associated with the un-Islamic land of Bengal" during the 19th century, to the creation of East Pakistan as a separate state for Muslims, and even more, from the birth of Bangladesh as a secular state, to the Islamization of the country, we can find many reasons to argue that while 'Muslim identity' has been used by politicians for their own ends, the identity of the Muslim rural masses in South-West Bangladesh chiefly reflects the past "painful culture conflict (when) they were made to feel that as Muslims they were different from their neighbours but were not sure as to the correct way to differ" (Abecassis 1990: 111). In the urge to discover a national identity, the leaders of the country have appealed to the Bangladeshi people to find in Islam the centre of unity. "However, to this day ambiguities remain as to what it means to be a Bengali [Bangladeshi?] Muslim, a situation which makes it difficult to define a national ideology" (Blanchet 1984: 9). As a consequence, this is reflected in the set of ideas and values that Muslims share with Hindus in relation to what or who is '*tamasik*'. This 'pervasive philosophical outlook'[89] is one of a very practical nature for the Muslims of South-West Bangladesh. Before 1947 the Hindus held political and economic power, and after the partition of the country, many caste Hindus left for India. The Hindus who remained in the area, even though a minority, were no worse-off than the Muslims. They re-arranged their hierarchical positions confirming their ideology and started negotiating at an empirical level for their share of power. The Muslims, on the other hand, although not openly sharing the caste Hindu ideology, needed to compromise, if they were to share economic and political power, and thus contributed to keeping '*jati* thinking' alive. The only people set apart from this process or, at least, those who did not participate in an active way, were the groups on the border of the Muslim and Hindu *samaj*, considered by both *mayla jati-tamasik*-'Untouchables'. With the formation of Bangladesh, neither secularization earlier nor Islamization of the country later, has given hope for the future of these groups. It seems that both caste Hindus and Muslims find reasons in their religious practice and ideology to set apart those who are not blessed with wealth and prosperity by God: their extreme poverty is a sign that they are distant from God or gods, reason enough to be ostracised by the rest of society. The 'purity/nearness to God/auspiciousness' and 'impurity/remoteness from God/ inauspiciousness' categories have always played an important role in religious ideology and praxis, despite proclamations to the contrary from preachers and theologians. This acquires a particular relevance

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89 " Muslims clearly cannot adhere openly to the caste system for they would betray the tenets of Islam which proclaim the equality of all believers. The brotherhood of those who pray together at the mosque is readily acknowledged as a norm which defines Muslims and sets them apart from Hindu caste society. Still, in Bangladesh and possibly elsewhere in Muslim India, the notion of purity and pollution appears in another guise, mainly that of a pervasive philosophical outlook which links purity with auspiciousness and impurity with misfortune, illness and catastrophe. This pervasive philosophical outlook is shared by both Muslims and Hindus and, in Bengal, it may be said to form part of this common 'Bengali' heritage which belongs to the two religious communities" (Blanchet 1984: 30-1).

when 'purity'/prosperity on the one hand and 'impurity'/poverty on the other, have been made to coincide, as in the case of the Rishi.

Ethnosociology being so preoccupied in offering "a conscious alternative..... a second lens through which all could look, a second language in which all could speak" (Marriot 1989: 2), seems to forget that many of the classifications used to prove an 'emic' vision of reality "were composed by someone, or some group, at a particular historical moment or series of moments .... in the interest of someone or some group who composed them..... [and this interest] is not accidental but rather intentional" (Smith 1989: 258). In a recent article, Dirks, contesting Dumont's position and asserting the "appropriation and reinvention" of caste under British rule, attempts to demonstrate through ethnohistory how the royal caste of the Kallar in Pudukkottai sustained with royal grants (*maniyams*) the entire structure of the local village ritual. These facts reveal in his view that "structures of power play a central role in the social organization of caste and kinship, that politics is fundamental to the process of hierarchilisation and the formation of units of identity" (Dirks 1989: 72). Furthermore, these kings belonged to an unclean caste "inappropriate for a Hindu kingship, and therefore inappropriate donors for Sanskritic temples and Brahmans" (ibid.: 64). Similarly, it might be inappropriate -but it does happen- to accept government contributions by an Islamic state authority to celebrate the Durga *Puja* in South-West Bangladesh, or to ask the Rishi for *cauda* on occasion for the same *puja*. Dirks' conclusions on ethnohistory[90] and ethnosociology[91] suggests that it is not only 'western voices' which can be hegemonic in relation to Indian thought, but that some Indian voices too can be hegemonic in relation to other Indian voices.

Raheja, engaged in the same discussion and refusing Dumont's view which sees hierarchy and caste focused on the Brahman value of purity, offers an alternative understanding of caste and of Hindu society "that focuses on the ritual aspects of the role of the dominant caste, particularly on prestation patterns and *jajmani* relationships" (Raheja 1989: 79). Furthermore, the role played by colonialism, in her mind, brought "the elevation of Brahmanical textual formulations about *varna* and hierarchy to the level of unqualified hegemony over other traditions and other sets of values" (ibid.).

The central theme of Raheja's argument evolves around the idea of *dan* (the gift) made by the dominant caste (Guar *jajmans*) to Brahmans, Barbers, Sweepers and the other service castes, who are obliged to accept *dan* from them.

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90 "... [P]art of the task of ethnohistory is to contest the dominant part of history, which in India has always been a Western voice . . . Ethnohistory can therefore assist in the project of recuperating a multiplicity of historical voices, revealing for India an active, vital integral historiographical industry" (Dirks 1989: 75)

91 " Not only has ethnosociology been insufficiently clear about the epistemological privilege it assumes in its claim to re-present indigenous forms of knowledge, it has excluded a wide range of historical questions, as also any consideration of the relations of knowledge and power beyond a restricted form of cultural analysis" (Ibid.)

> .... Villagers say that *dan* is always given 'to move away inauspiciousness'... The recipient must ...'digest' (*pachna*) the evil and inauspiciousness contained in the gift... (Raheja 1989: 82).[92]

This pattern -the implicit intentionality in the giving of *dan* as promotion of prosperity, well-being and auspiciousness- is similar, as recalled by Raheja, to the intentionality of the pre-classical Indic sacrifice where the Brahman, the recipient of sacrificial gifts "was to accept the evil and death *yajamana* by eating from the offerings; the recipient of the gift took upon himself the 'evil' (*papman*) and thus ensured life and prosperity (*sri*) for the donor" (Raheja 1989: 86).

The gift the Rishi had to accept was, without any doubt, the skin and hides of the animals with which they used to make, and still make, their drums. Skin and hides are still considered *mayla* (dirty) and as such a source of inauspiciousness and 'evil'. Furthermore, to touch dead animals and to remove their carcasses (*mara choya*), not excluding the possibility of feeding on carrion (*mara khaoya*), could well represent the 'digestion' of evil and inauspiciousness contained in the gift. When the Rishi nowadays want to justify their eating beef (and carrion), they resort to a tradition according to which, in ancient times, they were indispensable for the celebration of the ritual since they would have consumed the meat used in the sacrificial *puja* (cf. Appendix 2a). Furthermore, when some animal dies and the Rishi are required to remove the carcass, even today they receive the skin as *paona* or gift/remuneration (Tobanelli: 1989: 11). In Raheja's account the centrality of the ritual action in which *dan* is given and received is paramount.[93] However, "it is the sacrificial function - Raheja concludes - the giving away and dispersal of evil and inauspiciousness for the well-being and prosperity of the village, that is seen by all castes in Pahansu as the fulcrum of dominance and of *jajmani* relationship in the village" (Raheja 1989: 99).

From this perspective we overcome Dumont's position[94] and can still account for the actuality of 'Untouchability' even though Brahmans are barely present in South-West Bangladesh, thus weakening Dumont's claim that the 'impurity of the Untouchable' is "conceptually inseparable from the purity of the Brahman" (Dumont 1980: 54). The presence of other dominant castes and groups and not the non-presence of Brahmans is what underlies the existence of the Rishi as 'Untouchables' in this area. The subsequent claim that "untouchability will not truly disappear until the purity of the Brahman is itself

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92 " *Dan* is always given in the context of ritual actions that are said to promote the 'well-being [achieved through] gift-giving' (*khair-khairat*) and auspiciouness (*subh*) of the donor and the village, through the transferal of 'evil' (*pap*), 'afflictions' (*kast*), 'faults' (*dos*), and inauspiciousness more generally (*nasubh*) from donor to recipient" (Raheja 1989: 82).

93 However, " this is not to say that the giving and the receiving of *dan* and this ritual centrality will necessarily have the same salience and the same significance in all Indian villages in which *jajmani*-like relationships are extant". Raheja also recognises that the dominance in the prestation patterns of the gift exchange is not always related to landholding and numerical preponderance, even though these are "necessary conditions for the foregrounding of centrality as a phenomenon of caste" (Raheja 1989:98).

94 According to Raheja, Dumont's position " privileges 'ideology' and defines it in such a way that it appears impervious to the circumstanciality of everyday life, in which relationships and ways of life are always open to multiple interpretations, indeterminacy and ambiguity" (Ibid.: 81).

radically devalued" (Ibid.) is equally invalid, because where Brahmans are a minority, they serve as *purohit* to those who hold power, and their 'religious purity' is important in so far as it brings well-being to the *bhadralok* and the rest of the community. This view, however, remains incomplete until we ascertain the Rishis' own consciousness of their 'Untouchability', and secondly, discover their methods of dialogue with the others to negotiate a new and different identity for themselves.

The Rishis' 'Untouchability' as seen by themselves

When the Rishi define their 'Untouchability' it is with reference to the position of their *jati* within society at large; so they call themselves a *nicu* (low) or *chata* (small) *jati*, separated from the *uccu* (high) or *bara* (big) *jati*, and from those belonging to a *uccu bamsa* ('lineage'). The Rishi recognise as *barajati* the four *varna* following classic literature but, above all, they acknowledge the presence of all the other *jati* in their area, including other 'Untouchables', as superior to themselves.[95] One set of myths of origin collected in the area (see Appendix 2a) reflect this frame of mind, whereby the Rishi are responsible for their own situation. One of these myths helps us identify the main characteristics of the Rishis' self-definition of their 'Untouchability'.

> In the Age of Truth (সত্য যুগ) a Rishi Muni would offer *Puja* in the hope of achieving nearness (নৈকট্য) to God (ঈশ্). Cow-meat would be used in this *Puja* and it would be taken from both thighs. The following day the meat would grow back again in the right place (যথাস্থানে). Faith and truth (বিশ্বাস ও সত্যের) in God and his divine effort (লীলা), made this possible. One day the task [of offering Puja] fell on one Rishi Muni (ঋষী মুনি) who, being tempted (লোভে), stole, cooked and ate some of the meat after the Puja. The next day, everybody saw that the meat had not grown back. The chief Rishi Muni conducted an enquiry and it was found that the *Pujari* had stolen and eaten the meat. The Pujari did not admit it, and the chief Rishi Muni cursed (অভিষাপ) him saying: " Go hence, you Muchi (তুই মুচি); from now on you will work as a Muchi. You will cut and eat cow's meat; you will perform a low task (নীচ কাজ). This is my curse and from now on you will accomplish this task". Henceforth the Rishi (রিশি) community was divided: the *Pujari* and his people became the lower section (ছোট ভাগ), i.e. those who perform low tasks, and the chief Rishi and his people formed the higher section (বড় ভাগ). The Rishi were the noblest (শ্রেষ্ঠ) of human kind, but as a result of their deeds (কর্মকাজের জন্য), they became low (অতীনীচ) and untouchable (অস্পৃশ্য).

Though the obvious meaning of the myth does not require an exegetical explanation, we nevertheless need to identify some key-words which reveal other hidden realities in the Rishis' perspective of their situation. The primeval optimal position of the Rishi and subsequent fall, common to many low-caste myths, is described vividly here as in the other Rishi myths. In the past they were what today they are not, and they possessed in the past what today they do not possess. 'Nearness to God' was what made them his representatives among the human race: the masters of *puja*, of adoration

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95 " I once asked a Muchi to give me a list of the castes of the immediate vicinity of Kanairali [South-West of Jessore]. He tried to do this and named the castes but did not mention his own. When I asked him where the Muchi fitted in, he said that from where I had written down the names of the other castes in my book I should turn a few pages and then write the name of the Muchi because that was how much they were separated from the others" (Fagan 1979: 1).

and contemplation. They were specialists in the *Gomedh Jog* or cow sacrifice, and through the power of *sadhana* (asceticism) they would restore the slaughtered animals to life. Greed (*lobh*) was the main reason for their fall, and often this greed is attributed to the women, or wives of the Rishi. The result of the bad deed (*kharap kaj*) was to be condemned to a low place (*nicu kule/atinicu*) in society and divided among themselves, performing a low job (*nicu kaj*), cutting and enjoying dead meat (*mara mamsa*) or in a word, being a *Muci*, separated from God and from mankind.

These myths, which typify the Rishi acceptance[96] of the place given them by society, disclose the attitude of those Rishi who, supposedly accepting their *karma*, recognise themselves as not belonging to humankind: "*Amra manus na*" (We are not human beings), "*Amra nirjatita*" (We do not have any *jati*), "*Amader jati bhalo na*"(Our *jati* is not a good *jati*). Furthermore, the acceptance of *karma* nullifies every effort for a possible change of their situation, since they are, in the eyes of society, fundamentally and ontologically *tamasik*. By sharing this perspective they define themselves as intrinsically and existentially 'corrupt' or *adharmik*: "*Amader swabhab kharap*" (Our nature is rotten).[97]

The reality of segregation is experienced by the Rishi from a very early age, all through their lives up until their death. From childhood they are not to mingle with other children and, if they are able to go to school with others, they learn a lesson for life: children and school-teachers will ridicule them, and take advantage of them, and their merits will not be recognised. They are all the more disheartened when they realise that this same treatment is reserved for their parents and elders: even their caste Hindu and Muslim classmates can treat Rishi elders contemptuously without incurring any sanction. The lesson continues once adult: if they are lucky enough to be offered a job, they have to accept being cheated and underpaid. Their self-respect is utterly destroyed when their sisters, mothers, daughters and wives are made to provide the *bhadralok* and *mahajan* of the area with sexual services, in exchange for loans and protection. The loans have then to be repaid at high interest and all protection is dropped as soon as the *bhadralok* commits himself to village communalist politics. Supposedly, the Rishi, cheated over and over again, will hold themselves responsible for their bad *karma*, and will console themselves by handing down from one generation to the next, the myths that recount how, in the past, they belonged to a noble race (*nami dami/srestho*).

The psychological conditioning derived from this paradox has had disastrous effects on the life of the Rishi *samaj*; believing all equally *kharap* (corrupt), there is no trust among themselves and every other group is seemingly better than theirs in all respects. This internal division, clearly illustrated in the Dumuria case, favours the control over the Rishi group by external forces, which not only contribute to

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96 " We are arguing, in common with Dumont and with the ethnosociologists, that at the deeper levels of Indian village culture so conceptualised, Untouchables and higher-caste actors hold virtually identical cultural constructs, that they are in nearly total conceptual and evaluative consensus with one another" (Moffatt1979: 291).

97 " It is interesting to note that in the dictionary *chamar* is given as also having the figurative meaning of 'merciless and base man' " (Fagan 1979:7).

preserving divisions to their own advantage, but provide the Rishi with the ideological basis of a highly negative other-ascribed self-image.

A different set of myths, to be discussed in the next section, constructed around the figure of Ruidas, (cf. Appendix 2b) illustrates this second position which, though it might seem to contradict the previous one, in reality co-exists with it. The former attitude representing the Rishis' assent to the position attributed to them in society is complemented by this other attitude of 'dissent'.

The 'assent-dissent' spheres of the Rishis' self-consciousness will be explored by an analysis of their 'religious' world which springs directly from the two co-existing dispositions; 'consensus' or assent symbolising for the Rishi the desire to re-establish those links which were severed with society, and 'dissent' representing a new way forward in their relations with it. The former is an attempt on the part of the Rishi to be accepted back by the dominant ideology, while the latter represents a departure from this position whereby 'salvation' is being sought elsewhere, e.g. Bhakti movements, Vaisnavism, Christianity, political involvement etc... Both positions constitute a reality in the mind of the Rishi, never at peace with itself, and always in search of an answer.

4. The Rishi and Hindu Dharma

When asked which '*dharma*' they follow, the majority of Rishi in South-West Bangladesh answer either '*Sanatan Dharma*' or '*Hindu Dharma*' qualifying themselves as 'Hindus', as opposed to other 'faiths'. Hindu *Dharma* represents for these Rishi a possibility of being re-united with the rest of society, of going back to an original 'oneness'. Hindu *Dharma*, however, also represents that which keeps them separated from society, the perpetuation of that broken 'oneness'. The Upanishadic concept of *Ek - Eka* (One - Oneness) means 'to be one' with oneself and with the rest of the world. The Rishi, aware of the separation (*parthakya*) and longing for the recovery of 'oneness', adopt Hindu *Dharma* as the only way of being recognised as *manus*, risking thus a contradiction.

A Rishi approach to *dharma* must therefore be considered within the general framework of their position in society and it is here that we discover three different levels of *dharma*: 1) the Rishi *dharma* as understood and implemented by others in relation to the Rishi, 2) the Rishis' own understanding of *dharma*, and the way they implement it, and 3) the Rishis' consciousness of both a self-ascribed and an other-ascribed *dharma*, which generates a third and conflicting level, fluid and ambiguous.

Considering that for the Rishi, as for other Untouchables, it was not permitted to have any knowledge of *dharma*, to read the sacred texts, to perform religious ceremonies, to be served by Brahmans, or, in a word, to get closer to the divine, one is surprised by the ways re-invented by them to return to the centre of this *dharma* from the periphery. They, who were forbidden to read the sacred texts, are called by the same name as those who wrote the Veda and preached the ancient *dharma*, the *Rsi*; a name no doubt imposed on them, but still adopted by them and one with which they identify themselves. They have regained the texts and reinterpreted them; they have stolen the works of the Brahmans, making their own *Bauni*; and they have stolen the ways of classical Hindu 'spirituality', giving credit to their own *Gurudeb* and *Gosai*. This process, which, in other instances has been called 'Sanskritization' or 'Brahminization', has for the Rishi served to re-affirm their belonging to the Hindu community, not because they adhere to all the tenets of this community, but because it is the only way for them to prove their 'humanity'. The Rishi have understood that *dharma* in society is what constitutes a human being as such, and that this *dharma* must be expressed by way of rituals, ceremonies (*dharma-karma*), and/or 'contemplation' (*sadhana*) to be effective. In fact, in so doing they contravene the codes of the caste Hindu, who can never accept that the Rishi may get close to the divine. A myth from the *Siv Purana* and recounted to me by a caste Hindu, reflects the attitude of the latter towards the Rishis' 'religious' activity.

> There was a 'Muchi', who worked as a skinner, who decided to practise meditation (*sadhana*). In doing so he irritated Lord Siva. Thus Siva started sending thunder upon the earth to remind the 'Muchi' of his duty, which was not meditation, but skinning dead animals and working leather.

The Rishi, deprived of participating in celebrations like others and with others, resort to their own symbols to restore the 'broken bridge' and to revive their 'channel of communication' (Leach 1976:82). They make every effort to perform their own private or community *puja*, to have these presided over by their own *bauni* or *purohit*, and to make use of the sacred books. In their endeavour to imitate the caste Hindus, they use the Hindi language, since this is the closest they can get to Sanskrit. The irony behind this is that the Bengali language flourished as a language of the *laukik* ('vulgar') cults for the religion of the masses distant from the 'purity' of Sanskrit.[98]

Other signs of their *dharmik* concern relate to sacred (*pabitra*) places dedicated to the divinity: in their homes many Rishi reserve a corner (*Thakur ghar*) for the personal or family deity; outside the house they build small mud shrines (*than*) or plant the *tulsi* (basil), especially the Vaisnavas; in the middle of the *para* they generally have a *mandir* (temple), which is of little use to them, and expensive to run, but which, nevertheless, represents the presence of the divine in their midst, a guarantee that they are *manus*. To this end they readily renounce other commodities such as tube wells, road works or school buildings, when, on the occasion of elections, they are promised some help by the local politicians, they ask to have the *mandir* built or repaired.[99] Other things can wait, even the school building for the children: it takes a long time to become a *manus* with the school, but with the *mandir* one is recognised *manus* on the spot. They also honour 52 pilgrimage spots, sacred for the Hindus, which are derived from the 52 parts of (Sati) Durga's body when this was scattered over the earth. Some Rishi even venture to India to visit these places: Tarakeshwar, in honour of Siva, being the most popular among them.

Other deities taken from the Hindu pantheon and dear to the Rishi are Kali, Narayan, a manifestation of Vishnu, Manasa, the snake goddess, Hari, Durga, the wife of Siva called also Sakti, and lately also Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and prosperity, and Saraswati, goddess of speech, learning, arts and wisdom, the latter representing an amelioration in the life of the Rishi. Kali and Siva are still the most loved by them.[100]

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98 " While Sanskrit was the vehicle of orthodox Brahmanism, Bengali literature owed its origin and early growth to the medieval cults [Sahajiya, Nath, Manasa, Chandi, Dharma] ..... They were non-Aryan, anti-Brahmanic, opposed to the caste system, and mainly prevalent among the lower sections of the population. They were called *laukik* or vulgar [folk] in order to distinguish them from the orthodox Brahmanism ....." (Gosh 1976 [1948]: 14).

99 This was the case of the Rishi para in Putimari (Chuknagar), where the Rishi at the 1988 elections asked the chairman to build in their *para* a *pakka mandir*. The other case was that of Hatbas Rishi para where during June 1989 they received some money to build a *mandir*. This is what they did eventually, even though they were in need of repairing the school for their children.

100 " These two *pujas* to Kali and to Shiva are the most important religious celebrations which take place within their para and I think the most significant. Their rejected, depressed suffering situation is reflected in their pleas to Kali as mother to protect them from any more suffering..... With regard to Shiva there is something of the same attitude but more in terms of appeasement of this destructive god rather then a plea for protection..... Coupled with these ideas there is an idea of affinity with Shiva. He too was rejected and separated because of his offence to Brahma, the god of the Brahmins, and forced to beg for living, just as they were rejected and separated because of their offence to the cow, the symbol of the Brahmins..... Shiva and they are both governed by the same quality of tomo [tamasik] or coarseness so that in a sense they are allies in sin" (Fagan 1979: 11-12).

Despite the presence of all the main Hindu gods and goddesses in the Rishi cosmology, this is not complete without contemplating the reality of a spirit world (*Adhiswar*) whose vitality animates people, objects, places and events. The words used to define this spirit coincide with the names used in Hindu terminology to refer to God (*Bhagavan, Iswar*) or the creator (*Srstikarta*), and the interpretation given by the Rishi, even though in some ways similar to the Hindu view, has certain distinctive features. The Rishi differentiate between direct worship (*bhajanakara*) to *Iswar* without the need of *murti/Thakur* (statue/image), a form of veneration called '*nirakar*', which literally means 'formless-incorporeal', to distinguish it from the '*sakar*' way of worshipping, where images are used.

> Worshipping the Gods - Goddesses means engaging a solicitor (*ukil*). On the final day of judgement when I have to answer for all my activities, at that time this *ukil* will speak for me. For this reason they are worshipped..... Moreover, each deity has some individual power (*khamata*) and authority (*kartrtta*) and works for us from within this power. For instance, Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth; Sitala is the saviour of plagues; Manasa is the goddess of snakes; Durga Ma is the saviour, etc... If they are worshipped then they help us from within their power, and after death they help us go to heaven (*swarge*). These are beliefs of the people of the Rishi community. ..... *Murti* are images of god and goddesses. If we place ourselves before them, our mind becomes holy and we are 'caught' by them. So worshipping in front of a *murti* does not mean worshipping the *murti*, but the reality behind it. When we worship the *murti* it is like the image of Jesus for the Christians.....[101] Besides, during this era our worshipping the gods-goddesses help us to adore God. As Ramakrisna Paramhamsa Dev said: "*Ma Iswar, Iswari Ma*" [Mother is God, God is Mother]. Here 'Ma' means Goddess Kali. ... Many wise men who reflected on all these topics, tell us that in order to walk in the path of *Bhakti* the only way is through *puja*. Sree Krishna said in the Gita : "Whomever you worship I get everything. That is, if a drop of water is put anywhere in this world, it will go to the sea. In the same way, whatever you offer to any deity, all comes to me." That is why the Hindus and also the Rishi through *puja* worship God indirectly.

The Rishi admit to having borrowed their forms of 'religiousness' from the *BaraHindura* ('big' Hindus), meaning the caste Hindus, and they also acknowledge that to be called descendants of the *Muni-Rsi* and to be excluded from religious activities is a trick of the caste Hindus.

> Though we are accepted as Hindus, we are not given the opportunity to participate in religious ceremonies. Our money would not be used for the *puja* [they are not generally asked to pay the *canda*-contribution]. Even the revenue money to be given to the "Big Hindus" would be washed in the pond before being kept in the box, otherwise, from the touch of our money, their money would become dirty (*mayla*)..... Many tell the Rishi that they are descendants of the Muni-Rishi of the Veda-Purana. Since one Rishi by mistake flayed a dead cow, from then on they have been hated. ..... I think that through these words of consolation, the Rishi are encouraged to carry on their work (*karma*). They say to us: "It does not matter if you are hated, you are high class (*bara klas*)". This is a trick of the Hindus.....

The migration of many caste Hindus to India reveals another aspect of the 'religious' segregation of the Rishi. As long as the caste Hindus were present in large numbers and economically strong in this area, the Rishi have always been kept away and on the occasion of community *puja* were never asked to contribute to the expenses (*canda*). Over the past twenty years, however, some Rishi of good economic standing have been asked to make contributions. Lately, due to particular circumstances, the caste Hindus invited the Rishi to participate in their *puja*. This was the case of the caste Hindus in Tala where

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101 Here my informant engages in a long discussion using a familiar example for a westerner. He makes a comparison between the respect shown by the Christians to an image of Jesus, ('though it is only a peace of paper with some marks of ink on it'), and the respect-veneration towards the *murti*.

in 1988, during the preparation for the Durga Puja, some Muslims destroyed the Durga statue causing a great upheaval among the Hindus. Threatened by the Muslims' position, the Hindus thought it better to increase their number by inviting the better-off Rishi. These, however, decided on that occasion to organise their own Durga *Puja*. It seems that they are economically strong enough to be independent, and that their leaders, in particular, have realised that it is far better 'to be first in Gaul than second in Rome'. Nevertheless, the temptation for some Rishi to accept this invitation is strong. Indeed for some it offers the possibility of starting a process of individual mobility and the fulfilment of a dream.[102]

The paradoxical position of the Rishi and their ambivalent reaction activate a deep conflict in the Rishis' mind, resulting in a sense of identity full of ambiguities which are reflected in all aspects of the Rishis' life. Although they want to control their *dharma* as the Hindus do through *dharma-karma* (ritual), they are nevertheless 'exempt' from many ritual rules (*niam-kanun*). On the one hand they feel free from obligations, on the other, they are 'enslaved' by this sort of freedom. When they want to escape from their situation, their 'licence' is viewed negatively as a reason for them to stay where they are. The vicious cycle is thus completed at the expense of the Rishi who, despite their dissent, remain, for the rest of society, in a position of paradoxical, perpetual, and boundless 'liminality'.

A second group of myths, used by the Rishi to negotiate their identity, refer to Ruidash and are commonly found in the *Bakta Mala* and the *Bhagvana Ravidasa*.[103] These are widespread among the Rishi of South-West Bangladesh and represent, in my opinion, a reassessment of the Rishis' status within the Hindu *samaj*.

> Ruidash was an ardent devotee (*bhakta*) of God (*Bhagavan*). In those days, it was the custom that no religious festival (*bhoj*) would be complete without serving (*seba*) the Rishi. One day Narad was sent to invite Ruidash. Narad found Ruidash engaged in his task (*tar karma*). After receiving the invitation, Ruidash told Narad to take a bath in his pond, since it was already dinner-time. Narad felt squeamish because the pond was full of submerged skins (*camra*), but a voice from the sky said to him, "Go, Narad and bathe". As soon as he dipped into the water he beheld, to his great surprise, Mother Ganges and Bhagavan Narayan himself in the pond.
> Later Narad started arranging the feast and seated everyone. In those days bells would chime in Heaven during the time of *bhoj* to announce its success. Since no bells were chiming, Narad was very upset and surprised, and wondered what could have gone wrong. Narayan himself came down and told him that the bells would not ring until his *bhakta* Ruidash Muchi joined the feast. As soon as Ruidash Muchi sat down to eat, the bells started chiming causing great amazement among all present. The Rishi community dates back to that time.

This and other myths collected in the area (see Appendix 2b) present an alternative meaning from the previous set of myths. The setting of the myth is again a religious celebration, but the order of events

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102 I was told about the happiness of a fifty-year old Rishi in Chuknagar who, for the first time in his life, was allowed to enter the temple and remain at Durga's feet. It was clear for him that the caste Hindus had recognised his dignity as *manus* before the whole community. However, the majority of the Rishi in Chuknagar, unable to participate in the caste Hindus' *puja* or to afford their own Durga *Puja* in 1988, compromised with the celebration some days later of the Narayan *Puja* in their *para*. The chanting of the glories of Rama continued throughout the night and the music, the singing and the beat of drums grew louder to let others know that they too were celebrating their *puja*.

103 "This modern anthology contains almost all the legends regarding the life of Ravidasa, compiled by one of his devout followers" (Dharhan Sing 1981: 19-20)

is subverted: there the Muni-Rishi fall from a high to a low position and their curse is to skin dead animals and work with leather; here Ruidash is not only considered a *bhakta* (devotee) by *Bhagavan* despite his work, but he is the real devotee and an example for others. The old curse on the Rishi becomes here both an invitation to the *bhoj* and its fulfilment. Clearly this second set of myths has been adopted under the influence of Vaisnava and *Bhakti* movements, which find acceptance among the Rishi, many of whom consider themselves as belonging to the *Boisnab Tantra*, that offers them equality and the abolition and the abolition of caste discrimination.

The implication of *karma* in Rishi cosmology

A Rishi understanding of *karma* involves an analysis of the different uses the Rishi make of this word and a comprehension of the meaning they attach to it. The first and most important content that the Rishi attach to *karma* is related to 'action', understood as a concrete activity which enables them to obtain some goal in life. *Karma* is their daily labour, the activity, business or enterprise which enables them to bring up their families and it is what measures their performance in the amelioration of their position. In this sense, *karma* is always positive and promising, distinguishable from a dishonest path, defined as *ku-karma* (bad action), often used by the Rishi to specify, for instance, their activity as cattle poisoners (the current expression being *ku-kaj* or bad job). The second important use of the word is with reference to the 'doctrine of *karma*'. This is known to the Rishi as a meta-term used by the caste Hindus to justify their high position and the Rishis' 'untouchability'. A Rishi will hardly recognise that his/her low position in society is a consequence of his/her deeds in a previous life. At the most, some of them would agree that their present *karma* is due to some sort of 'original sin' committed by their forefathers, who lived in the forest as hermits and were cursed by the divinity or tricked into doing the work of the Chamar (cf. Appendix 2a). Personal *karma* is rarely adduced as a proof of a previous life's misdeeds, except as a meta-term to excuse themselves from their own responsibilities in front of outsiders or caste Hindus. This can be seen as the Rishi rejoinder to the manipulation of the *karma* theory by the caste Hindus to keep the Rishi under control: thus the Rishi accept their ascribed *karma*, only when it solves an immediate, contingent problem, and absolves them from culpability in this life. The third notion of *karma* favoured by the Rishi is a 'general frame of reference' (Babb 1983: 171) to which they turn in order to control misfortune, not explaining it in terms of the fruit (*phal*) of past actions, but as a device to get some material help from foreigners and outsiders in certain circumstances. For everyday misfortunes, deities in general (*tar ichha* = god's wish), *bhut*, or witchcraft are cited as responsible. Moreover, when speaking of others, especially of non-relatives, they often justify misfortune as due to the stupidity of the victim. This clearly calls for individual responsibility which is at the basis of the justice internal to the Rishi *samaj*. When someone is found guilty and punished according to the *samajik* code of conduct, this person will not find refuge and escape by

recourse to the *karma* theory. This device is used by the Rishi in front of caste Hindus and outsiders in general but not among themselves.

If the Rishi, broadly speaking, apply *karma* to their present situation, they do it in so far as they believe that, through action (*karma*), they can change their present condition. It is this *karma*, intended as 'positive activity' which can bring hope for the immediate future. For the most part these remedies are ritual ones: propitiation of deities and spirits, exorcism, avoidance of certain places or activities, and the use of *mantra* and *maduli* (charms). Nevertheless, and despite the fact that the Rishi recognise individual responsibility, they experience the impossibility of being in complete control of their destiny.

The Rishi know from experience that the *karma* of many other groups in the area does not result in a better lot for the latter. Even though 'untouchability' puts them in the lowest place in society, poverty and misfortune are such a widespread reality that 'bad *karma*' (derived from the *karma* theory) is for the Rishi a characteristic not of their *samaj* alone. Moreover when general misfortune affects everybody, as in the case of floods and cyclones, very frequent in this part of the country, the Rishi are rewarded with the death of many animals to be skinned, bringing them a considerable fortune. In this case their bad *karma* as 'Muchi' acts in their favour as skinners.

From what has been said so far, we can conclude that the Rishi do not believe in the *karma* theory inescapable effects. If anything, it becomes a challenge which motivates all the more their protest against situations of inhumanity. The passivity and fatalism so often ascribed to the Rishi and other 'Untouchables' on account of their belief in the theory of *karma* have very little logical or analytical foundation. As we have already seen, the Rishi define themselves as a *chatajati* or a *nimna sreni* (small-low *jati*), who sometimes perform *chata-kaj* ('small'-low job), but they would hardly speak of themselves as a *mayla jat* (dirty *jati*) occupied in a *mayla kaj* (dirty job). "Without the concept of *karmik* retribution, matters of purity and pollution become seemingly unimportant, and it would be odd if the Untouchable castes accorded them significant attention" (Juergensmeyer 1982: 99). Placed in a condition of indefinite 'liminality' or "in a state of continuous pollution", the Rishi are not bound to observe many restrictions, which gives them a certain liberty of action compared to the caste Hindus, and "the distinction between pure and impure becomes hardly relevant to them.... In this sense the stigma of untouchability has liberated them from the concept of ritual pollution altogether ..... and their own religious beliefs in spiritual powers do not require the concept of ritual pollution" (ibid.: 99-100). It is also true, however, that this liberty of action, interpreted by caste Hindus and others as 'licence', is thrown in the Rishis' face as a justification for their *a-dharmik/karmik* status.

The Rishi and *Mukti* (মুক্তি)

Moksa or *Mukti* is a key concept in classical Hindu thought which expresses the idea of 'release', in particular a final release from the bondage of life, which is full of illusion (*maya*), in order to be reunited with *brahman*.[104]

While from a theoretical point of view, the Rishi acknowledge that *mukti* means, according to Hindu tradition, to be rescued from the endless cycle of births, from a more experiential perspective they perceive *mukti* as the action of being rescued (*uddharpaoya*) from some kind of danger (*bipad*) or trouble (*samasya*). The *bandha mukti* (*mukti* from bondage of life) is present in the mind of the Rishi more as a point of reference than as a problematic issues. Their real interest, even in a 'transcendental' spectrum, it is not so much 'release' per se, as the obtaining of the *maha mukti* (মোহ মুক্তি-*mukti* from false consciousness) and nearness - proximity (*sannidhya*) to God. The after-life is for the Rishi a return to God and there is no doubt that, from the myths they recount, death and final *mukti* practically coincide. The span that separates life from the final *mukti* is, however, considered important by them as the place where *mukti* is gradually achieved. In this sense they are very sceptical in considering their troubles and sufferings as *maya* (illusion); moreover they rely upon and give much importance to their everyday experience where *mukti* takes place.

> If there is no happiness in the *mukti* originating from the mundane and earthly daily life, the eternal *mukti* will be unobtainable. Being freed from the mundane and earthliness, man receives a foretaste of the final *mukti* and then tries hard to obtain that *mukti*. If a subjugated person is freed, he will understand the greatness of *mukti*. If a servant (দাস-*das*) is released from a life of servitude or if a prisoner is freed from life imprisonment, he will then feel the taste of *mukti*. If not, the word *mukti* or that 'blind man trying to measure something' would be the same. In real life, those who have been in trouble and have been rescued have gained a clear idea about *mukti*. In the same way, he who has tasted the happiness of *mukti* from the worldly life (সাংসারিক-*samsarik*), knows the taste of eternal *mukti*. Daily life *mukti* sets us on the road to real *mukti*.

Though we can appreciate that the final goal is placed 'outside the realm of this world' by my informant, we nevertheless find that his interest in concrete daily experience remains overpowering and definitive. In his vision of reality it is possible to form a complete circle describing the parabola of *mukti*, conceived as 'eternal', experienced as everyday, and rejoined as 'real *mukti* '. I believe that the daily *mukti* for my informant is no less real than the eternal one; on the contrary it is the reality of concrete experience which validates the reality of 'eternal *mukti*', the future nearness to God being measured by the capacity to get close to him during life, experiencing from him a taste of *mukti* in the form of rescue from fear and pain, disease, suffering, greed and sin. *Mukti* is thus conceived as a medium to obtain what every human being is searching for: peace and happiness (*santi/sukh*).

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104 This concept recalls very closely the idea of 'salvation' in Judeo-Christian tradition, so much so that Christianity in Bengal has applied the term *Muktidata* (saviour - liberator) to Christ.

Religious specialists in the Rishi *samaj*

We have already seen, in our discussion of Hindu *dharma*, how the Rishi, not being served by the Brahman or other religious specialists, have substituted these with members of their own community. The most common religious functionaries are the *thakur*, *purohit* or *baon*, all of whom carry out the same activity of presiding at marriage and *sraddha* ceremonies, as well as the private or communitarian *puja* of the Rishi. This activity is predominantly hereditary, but should someone want to present his candidature as *thakur*, once accepted by the *Bara neta* and other *matabbar*, it is enough for him to feed the representatives of his 'confederation' of villages (27, 13, or 11 villages). Normally the Rishi *thakur* make a living out of their profession and follow certain *niam* (codes) of conduct, related to ritual 'purity'.

Another category of Rishi religious specialists are the *Gosai* (from Goswami), who are divided into two different main groups: *Sai*[105] and *Gauri*. While the former is more along the line of a wandering Vaisnava *sadhu*, a devotee of Krishna, wearing the *geruabhasan* (orange coloured rope) and distributing *tulsi* necklaces to his faithful, the latter belongs to a *Gauria* or group of *guru* initiated into the *Gaur* (Chaitanya) Vaisnava sect. He receives proper training and can, at some stage, initiate disciples. Often they do not find enough disciples to make a living, so they themselves replace the *thakur* or *baon* in conducting *puja* and religious gatherings.

The last and most important religious leader among the Rishi is the *Guru* or *Gurudeb*. Like the *Gauri* he receives a training under a chosen *guru* but unlike him, he never presides at *puja* or other ceremonies, for he believes only in *nirakarpuja*, or the adoration of the name of God, without the need for exterior images or statues. Among the Rishi a man does not become a *guru* merely by choice but needs first of all to be chosen by another *guru* and sometimes he may be required by his *samaj* to embark on this vocation for the well-being of the community.[106] The training (*dikkha*) of a Rishi *guru* involves four different stages: the initial stage, *stull*, indicates the introductory phase of a novice who prepares himself for a long and arduous journey. Only at the second stage (*pravarta*/initiation)[107] is he fit to receive counselling and a code of conduct from the *guru*, together with the *mantra* (sacred formula) and the *tulsi mala* (basil necklace), which he will wear all his life as a sign of devotion to God-Krishna. When his *guru* judges that the time for him is right, he will start *sadhana*, a process of penance and fasting which will enable him to be a *sadhak*, or a seeker of the truth, not only for himself but also for

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105 The *Sai*, defined by the Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary "religious instructor or preceptor", are popularly associated in this area of Bangladesh with the *Aul* ("religious mendicants possessing supernatural powers"), the *Baul* ("Hindu stoical devotee and singer"), and the *Darbes* (" Muslim ascetic and fakir").

106 A young man from Khanpur (Tala), who was studying at the Boyra Technical School in 1989, had been requested by his *samaj* to become a *Guru*.

107 *Pravarta* is most probably a corruption of *prakrta marmartha*, or inner learning.

others; at this stage, in fact, he can start taking disciples, but will still be a *sadhak* until he finally receives from God the grace of *siddhi* . At this point he is no longer one who renounces but one who possesses the truth of God; once again, he must not keep this truth for himself but announce it to those willing to listen.

The Rishi are most respectful to their *guru* and, contrary to what happens with their *thakur* and *baon*, with whom they often quarrel and barter for the 'price' of a *puja*, they recognise a serious *guru*, not a self-appointed one, as a man of God. Their sense of *dharmikata* or "religiousness" is sharp enough to distinguish between a false and a real *guru*, a fake *bhakta* from a sincere one: the first is one who plays with the power of God trying to manipulate it (*akeri*), the second instead places himself before God as a seeker (*sadhak*) and, as such, awaits for God's answer (*jakeri*). The Rishi, even the most simple-minded among them, are not easily deceived by false *guru*:

> We consider the importance, place and role of the *Guru* among the Rishi as most relevant. Nevertheless it should be said that true *Guru* nowadays are very few. There are many *Guru* who do business selling their knowledge, but they are not what we would call true *Guru*.

On the other hand, the *guru* themselves accept this critical position from the people and react positively to it: "I can direct myself to God searching for the good of others (*jakrti*), yet I can also seek God for revenge or to damage others (*akrti*), but sooner or later I must account for it." The respect the Rishi have for their *guru* is illustrated by some myths which, among other things, are also used to justify the Rishis' initiative in becoming *guru* .

Many *sloka* (verses or stanzas) reported by the Rishi refer to the power of the *guru* as a mediator between God and man: "The *Guru* can save someone from the wrath of a god, but a god cannot save anyone from the wrath of the *Guru*". The myth of Eklabya taken from the *Mahabharata* and recounted by the Rishi to express the significance of *bhakti* to the *guru*, presents a close example of the tension between one's ideals of perfection and the urgency to become *manus*.

In January 1989 I interviewed Gurupodo Dev, a Rishi *Guru* from Khanpur (Tala). He received the *dikkha* (initiation) from his *dharmaguru* Susil Bharati of Jessore District, who had died in 1987. He practised the *Boisnab Dharma* and was the *guru* for 9784 Rishi followers. Gurupodo Dev had paid three visits to Tarokes (India) and many other pilgrimage places "to see the *sadhus* there and to learn from them how to practise *dharma*."

> ... I always take good advice from the *sadhus* and although I am a *guru*, I have still many things to learn. I tell my disciples that the best *dharma* is to believe in the Creator, and to be free of malice, not to be greedy, not to follow sinful ways, to speak the truth, and never think of caste system or divisions. This is my teaching.... Our economic situation is very poor and we don't have a good system of education. For this reason we are having a hard time improving... but everyone is always welcome at the guru's house...[108]

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108 Interview with Gurupodo Dev, 28-1-1989, Khanpur-Tala.

For those Rishi who have decided to follow a *guru*, their life revolves around his teachings and every action of daily life is performed in accordance with them. Furthermore, "it is the *guru*'s duty to eradicate disorder from social life" and, in order to do this he teaches his disciples proper rules and regulations. A true *Guru* takes a stand against the social division typical in a society founded on caste (*jati bhed* or *barna*) and tries to bring about a social integration of all the different groups.

> There are some basic teachings to which a true *Guru* is faithful: *Ahimsa param Dharma* (non-violence is the true religion) and *Duniae sakal manus saman* (on earth all men are equal) which reveal his position in favour of a caste-free society.

The poor condition in which the Rishi *guru* find themselves in Bangladesh does not enable them to be involved politically nor does it allow them to operate efficiently on behalf of their own people. Nevertheless, their presence still acts as a stimulus for many Rishi keeping the hope alive that they will some day be recognised as *manus* by others. Meanwhile these *guru* encourage their people to educate themselves as best they can. In a rural context, for example, where government schools do not function properly or where the Rishi are not welcomed, the *guru* acts also as a teacher of general knowledge. Even though their activity represents a mere drop in the ocean, they symbolise the aspiration of a crushed people waiting to assume their humanity.

PART TWO

The Rishi and Catholicism (1856-1952)

Introduction

Christianity was introduced into Bengal during the second half of the 16th century by Portuguese mercenaries and traders. These were soon followed by Jesuit (Josson 1921/1: 45-133), Augustinian (Hartman 1978) and Dominican (Hosten 1914a) missionaries, who, under the Padroãdo, cared for their spiritual needs and missionised the local people. In 1606, with the creation of Mylapore Diocese (Madras), the Bengal mission was placed under its jurisdiction. In 1624-5, *PropagandaFide*, the newly constituted Catholic body to rule mission territories, proposed creating a diocese in Bengal, but it was vetoed by the Court of Madrid on the grounds of Augustinian-Jesuit rivalry there (Alonso 1966). With the setback of Portuguese power, we witness the decline of Catholicism in Bengal. The arrival of the English and Dutch during the 17th century signalled the presence of Protestant missionaries and by the beginning of the 19th century the Catholics were cared for by a small group of Augustinians, while the Baptists, the Church Mission Society and the London Mission Society had established flourishing missions all over Bengal.[1]

Only in 1834, at the petition of the Calcutta Catholics, was the area established as the Apostolic Vicariate of Bengal, entrusted first to the Irish Jesuits, and then in 1838 to the local clergy. On February 17, 1845, the Holy See divided the Vicariate of Bengal into that of Calcutta and Chittagong, the latter under the direction of Calcutta. On 15 February 1850, they were constituted as independent ecclesiastical units to be called West (Calcutta) and East (Chittagong) Bengal. It was during this period that under the invitation of Mgr. Carew, the missionaries of San Calocero in Milan - later PIME - were entrusted with the Mission of Central Bengal (Kottuppallil 1988: 25-41).

In 1856, Mgr. Oliffe, succeding Mgr. Carew as Vicar Apostolic of West Bengal, asked *Propaganda Fide* to hand over his Vicariate to the Society of Jesus. Three years later the Jesuits of the Belgian Province arrived in Calcutta and on April 22, 1864, Mgr. Van Heule, S.J. was appointed as Vicar Apostolic. When the local hierarchy was established in India in 1886, the Vicariate Apostolic of Bengal became the Archdiocese of Calcutta. The same year, the Central Mission of Bengal which, with added territories to the North became the Prefecture of Central Bengal in 1879, was established as the Diocese of Krishnagar (see Map p.95). Our area of enquiry, for the period under examination, was under the jurisdiction of both the Diocese of Krishnagar (Jessore-Simulia) and the Archdiocese of Calcutta(Satkhira-Baradal).

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1 We will be particularly interested in the Baptists who established their missions in Jessore District (see Soddy 1978).

Missionary sources

As outlined in the general Introduction, the category of 'dialogue', open or implicit, is favoured in reading missionary sources (Appendix 5). While letters, reports and articles were written with an audience in mind, the diaries had no specific reader: they could have been written for the Bishop or Superior, or for the benefit of future missionaries to the field, or perhaps even for the missionary himself who in his solitude needed an 'other' with whom to initiate 'dialogue'. These early missionaries were very conscious of laying the foundations of these mission territories and through the pages of their diaries they speak of the successes and failures, hopes and disappointments of their everyday life with the Rishi.

In dialogue with the Rishi, the missionaries had to clarify their own identity to themselves, as expressed through ideals, methodology, ideology, theology, and above all through the choices made in concrete situations. On the other hand, the Rishi too had to clarify their personal identity to themselves, which was shaped most of the time by their belonging to a particular group in society, and in competition with the rest of this society. Dialogue thus proved for both a path to perception and self-awareness, leading into the spheres of cognition and representation. The very first attempt at dialogue made by the PIME Fathers in Krishnagar-Simulia resulted in classifications of the Rishi group, who were accepted or refused according to the tendencies of individual missionaries and their manner of relating to the group. There was, in fact, not a single policy but a variety of approaches which revealed from the outset a need to clarify issues, and maybe, even identities: (i) The Rishi, like everyone else, were in need of 'salvation'; (ii) they were the only ones open to 'conversion', and yet (iii) their 'salvation' was an obstacle to other peoples' (caste Hindus and Muslims) 'conversion'. (The latter would hardly accept belonging to Christianity which sheltered the Rishi).

The set of values, including Christian ethics, proposed by the missionaries, became at times an imposition. However, the Rishi soon learned that they were the 'important ones', for they provided justification for the missionaries' presence. They came to realise that, despite missionary efforts, they could still be themselves, and that they could negotiate their 'being Christians' whenever it suited them. In fact, only a small proportion of Rishi contacted by the missionaries did eventually 'convert', and even these negotiated their 'conversion'. The dialogue which at the outset seemed unbalanced, given that the missionaries could impose their values upon a group of 'poor people', resulted in a more or less balanced exchange. The 'salvation' the Rishi experienced was of a very concrete nature: help in time of poverty and distress, protection from persecution, education for the children, and prospects of land ownership. Above all, the new religion gave them legitimacy as belonging to 'humanity'. Their group's 'culture', or sub-culture, had been elevated to the standing of the 'cultures' which surrounded them; or at least they wanted to believe that they had achieved this in part. Naturally, the experience of ostracism was deeply rooted in their minds and so much a part of their daily lives that simply changing their name was not enough for them to become different. The

psychological components of 'Untouchability' still played an important role for all those involved in the Rishi-missionary encounter.

It appears very clearly from the historical sources that this 'dialogue' was often so conditioned by external and peripheral elements that it ran the risk of becoming a two-way monologue. The self-image of the missionary was hardly understood by the Rishi, and many of the Rishis' actions were certainly misjudged and misinterpreted by the missionaries. What clearly emerges, however, is the fact that missionaries and Rishi were communicating, despite many interferences, on a level of mutual contract or exchange: the protection given by the missionary was exchanged by the Rishi for their belonging to Christianity. Around this main feature the entire dialogue between the two rotates.

The Rishi response to Christianity

Rishi response to Christianity, varied as it might appear, generally conveys the meaning given by the Rishi to '*dharma*', in contrast to the meaning attributed to it by the missionaries. The missionaries, preoccupied in turning these 'heathens', 'children of sin and ignorance' into 'children of God', were offering, with conversion, a way of life to the Rishi as a means of obtaining 'Eternal Salvation'. The Rishi, instead, through acceptance of Christianity, were pursuing an 'immediate salvation': in order to escape the vicious circle in which they found themselves trapped, their experience of 'Salvation' had to be tangible and visible before becoming 'Eternal', and they needed to be fully accepted as human beings before being transformed into 'children of God'. When the Rishi, in particular the leaders, sought to please the missionaries, the two different meanings of *dharma*, at least to all appearances, got closer; on the other hand, when the Rishi did not need missionary support the meanings openly diverged. Reasons for conversion and likewise those for 'apostasy', became a bargaining trade in the exchange, partially explaining the Rishis' going back and forth.

Since the negotiation was conducted in a personalised way, only a small proportion of Rishi converted, in comparison with the number contacted and estimated as catechumens. Normally it was the leaders who decided for a village or group of villages to accept missionary protection, and the agreement was often made with a single missionary. The presence of this missionary over a lengthy period was a guarantee for the Rishi that promises would be fulfilled, which explained the results obtained by Marietti, Nava, Costa and Lazzaro in Simulia, and by Koster in Baradal-Satkhira. The departure or the death of one of them was considered a valid enough reason by the Rishi for leaving Christianity. The conversion-contract in its attachment to individual missionaries seems to repeat the personal tie of *guru* and disciple and discloses once more the 'material' character of the Rishis' understanding of 'religion': the Paternity of God had to pass through the human paternity of the missionary, to become a fully accepted experience. Some missionaries, addressed as 'Father of the

Rishi', in all good faith, could not prevent their role assuming a paternalistic tendency. During the middle period of this mission, when the figure of the zamindari was on the decline, the missionary proved a good substitute: the chance for the missionary to acquire land for Christian settlements, his power to help them in court cases and to defend them from others, presented the missionary with an ambiguous identity, not easily reconcilable with the identity the missionary himself wanted to convey as a 'man of God'. Here too, the Rishi knew how to turn the situation to their advantage, as part of the deal: the missionary as father-zamindar had to provide the Rishi with certain services, but even if the occasion arose, as a 'man of God', it was not expected of him to administer any punishment.

Missionary efforts in creating small theocracies, with the intent of defending their flock, in the end turned against the missionary, and the religious-cum-secular authority in his hands was not enough to prevent the Rishi leaders from attaining their share of power. Often the struggle for power within the Rishi group led some leaders to accept missionary intervention in order to strengthen their own leadership. At other times, the Rishi leaders refused all missionary proposals wanting to maintain an undivided leadership and it was most puzzling for the missionary when the leaders refused Christianity on purely 'religious' grounds.

At present the Rishi in relation to Christianity still see themselves as "a snake which holds in its mouth a big frog.... too big to be swallowed..... and too good to let go". The analogy of the Frog and the Snake could well represent the continuity or discontinuity of this 'dialogue', its possibilities of development and its intrinsic contradictions.

The wider setting of 'dialogue'

Caste Hindus opposed Rishi conversions for social, religious and political reasons. Socially the Rishis' contact with Christianity and western ideas gave them a basis from which to challenge casteism and exploitation as cheap labour, although this was normally pursued more by the missionaries than the Rishi themselves. Opposition on religious and political grounds was ultimately derived from the loss in numerical power of the Hindus versus the growing Muslim community.[2]

The Muslims played a contradictory role in the Rishi-missionary encounter, and although some accepted missionary concern for the Rishi, others were not willing to share supremacy over them. Undoubtedly, Muslim oppression had been, especially in Baradal, one of the causes of Rishi conversions.

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2 This issue was particularly relevant during the years that preceded Independence and the partition of India, when the numerical presence of Hindus and Muslims would have decided whether Jessore, Khulna and Khustia border Districts belonged either to India or to East Pakistan.

A special role was also played by the *badralok* (prominent people), *mohajan-malwari* (money lenders), and the Police. While these categories of people, Muslims and Hindus alike, opposed the missionary-Rishi dialogue at village level, they did not normally interfere at a higher level. Frequent missionary contacts with the Sub-Divisional Officer (S.D.O.), the District Magistrate (D.M.), and the Custom Inspector, indicate a close collaboration between the Mission and the Police. Ironically, the Baradal Rishi who had invited the missionaries to protect them from the Police, soon discovered that the missionaries needed to collaborate at a higher level with the Police to control some elements of the group. At village level, by contrast, the *Daroga*, head of the local police station, was at the service of the *badralok*, helping the latter to keep the Rishi in their place. In this case too, collaboration with the higher Police Officers was required to restore justice. The situation was complicated by the attitude of certain Rishi leaders who, either having lost their power or wanting to increase it, had recourse to alliances with the village *badralok*: this was strongly opposed by the missionary, who considered it an unnecessary intrusion of outsiders, disrupting Christian community life.

As the missionaries' closest collaborators, the Catechists occupied a prominent place in mission activity. Their main tasks were educating the people of the out-stations in the Catholic faith, running the village school, directing religious gatherings, keeping peace among the villagers, defending them in case of trouble and representing the missionary among them. They were asked to give meaning to what they preached by their example, and were normally married, in order to avoid the presence of a single male in a Rishi village. They received a monthly salary, sufficient to maintain themselves and their families.[3] They were usually brought from outside the Rishi group,[4] saving the missionaries from having to train their own catechists, and also responding to the common missionary belief that among the Rishi it was difficult to find the right sort of person. However, very few outsider-catechists met the desired requirements. When Rishi catechists were employed, these were either a complete failure, as happened in Satkhira during 1918-30, or they were highly praised for their dedication.[5] On some occasions the Rishi leaders or their sons were appointed as catechists, thus satisfying their request for a permanent job and, at the same time, implementing the missionary policy of uniting secular and religious powers: as a catechist, the *matabbar* had to follow missionary directives.

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3 The temptation to indulge in other business was always discouraged by the missionary, even though some catechists did undertake ventures with little success. Whilst this supported the missionary's point that spiritual leadership and material gain were not compatible, it contrasted with the Christians' perception that by converting they would gain access to wealth and means to develop their entrepreneurial skills.

4 The PIME missionaries and the Salesians borrowed catechists from other areas such as Krishnagar, Bhabarpara and Faridpur, and the Jesuits either from Calcutta or from Dhaka and Chittagong Dioceses.

5 This was the case of Pitor Roti Sarkar, a Rishi catechist of Simulia from 1920c. until his death on 14th January, 1938 (*SIM.* 2:68).

Normally the catechists would meet once a month at the mission centre to report back and to receive instructions.[6]

The role played by Protestant groups within the Rishi environment reveals, to the Rishi at least, not the presence of a sublime Religion, as the missionaries had presented Christianity, but a religion like others, where division, hatred and communal interest were more important than the quest for God. This issue, together with others, contributed to humanising religion. The Catholic missionaries in Jessore-Simulia were Italian, and they had learned to fight Protestantism mainly during theological training. Once in the field they met with two different kinds of 'Protestants': the British Civil Servants, who were not particularly interested in religion, and the Protestant missionaries. While the Catholic missionaries learned how to deal with the former, they engaged in a constant battle with the Baptists, from whom they 'snatched' the majority of their converts in Khustia, Faridpur and the Sunderbon.[7] The Protestant presence did not initially constitute a problem for the Rishi converts but, in time, they learned how to turn this presence to their advantage, threatening to revert to the Protestants when the Catholic missionaries did not meet with their demands.

Missionary nuns, though considered part of the missionary personnel, rarely held any decision-making power and were always considered mere ancillaries to the priest. Despite the chauvinist approach of the Catholic Church abroad as at home, the missionary sisters were an invaluable help for the priest who could not otherwise have contacted many Rishi women and children.[8] From the time when Marietti used to take the sisters with him visiting the villages, things have changed, and sisters have become more independent, involved in missionary activity following their own choice and charisma. Their ways of apostolate have, in many cases, been not only complementary to missionary priests but decisive in renewing women's role in the Rishi *Samaj*. The presence of new and different missionary groups of sisters opens up new possibilities of dialogue.[9]

A series of events favoured or disrupted missionary enterprise: periods of famine and floods, for instance, only accentuated the always precarious situation of poverty and destitution of the Rishi. The missionaries, generally speaking, tolerated their begging attitude, but rarely condoned the same attitude in Muslims and Namasudras. They recognised, however, that on certain occasions the poorer people

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6 At times the catechists of the southern mission of Satkhira-Baradal would go to the northern centre of Simulia to receive a proper training of two or three months; this was done until the year 1937, when the catechist school of Jessore started functioning with the sole purpose of training catechists for that area.

7 Protestants ministers (LMS, CMS, Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists) had been particularly busy in Khustia, Faridpur and the Sunderbon, among the Namasudra. In Jessore, and later in Khulna, the Baptists were the most active.

8 In point of fact, the Sisters of Charity of Lovere (Maria Bambina), who reached Jessore in 1864, have seen two different missionary groups leave this area, while they are still present among the Rishi.

9 The last to join were the Sisters of Charity of Mother Theresa in Baradal in 1989. Despite a great abundance of sources, the issue concerning the involvement of missionary nuns has rarely been touched upon in the thesis. This would be better achieved with a separate study.

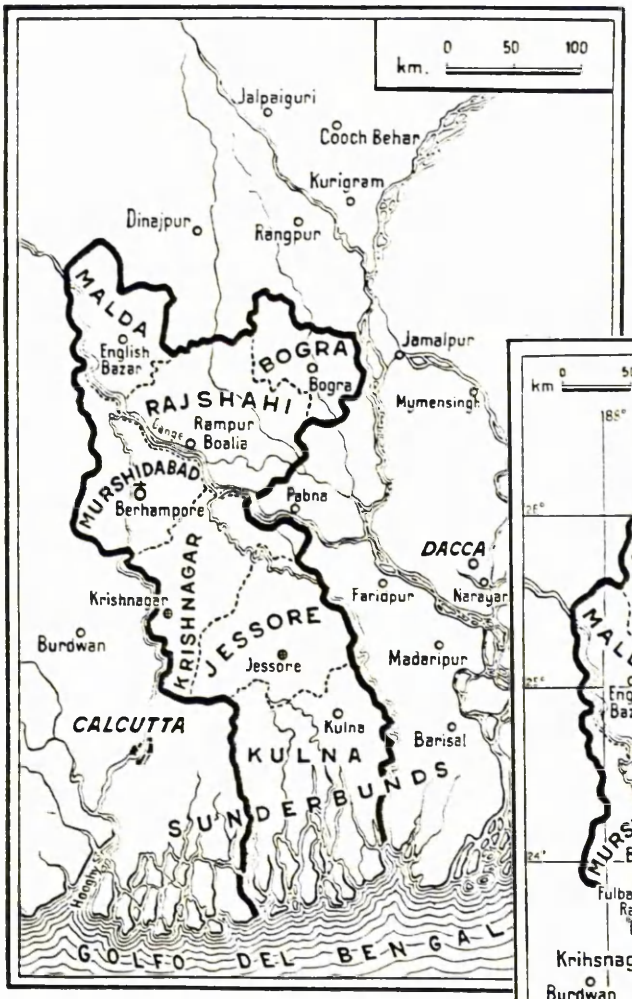
were more crafty and cunning than the middle-class, who were hit the hardest by a crash in prices and a lack of basic commodities.

Marriage alliances play an important part in the life of the Rishi and, as a consequence, became the battle-field in their negotiations. The missionaries, trying to impose new ethical codes, and preoccupied with saving the Catholic doctrine, rarely understood the feelings of the Rishi, relegating the problem to the 'barbaric' custom of child marriage. The lack of serious reflection on this issue, as on others related to 'adaptation-translation' of the Christian message, has supposed an instinctive non-acceptance by the Rishi of some basic Catholic principles, even at the present day. Christian marriage rules were not always broken by the Rishi merely in order to return to Hindu practices; often this was used as a threat to the missionary, and a weapon to re-establish power relations.

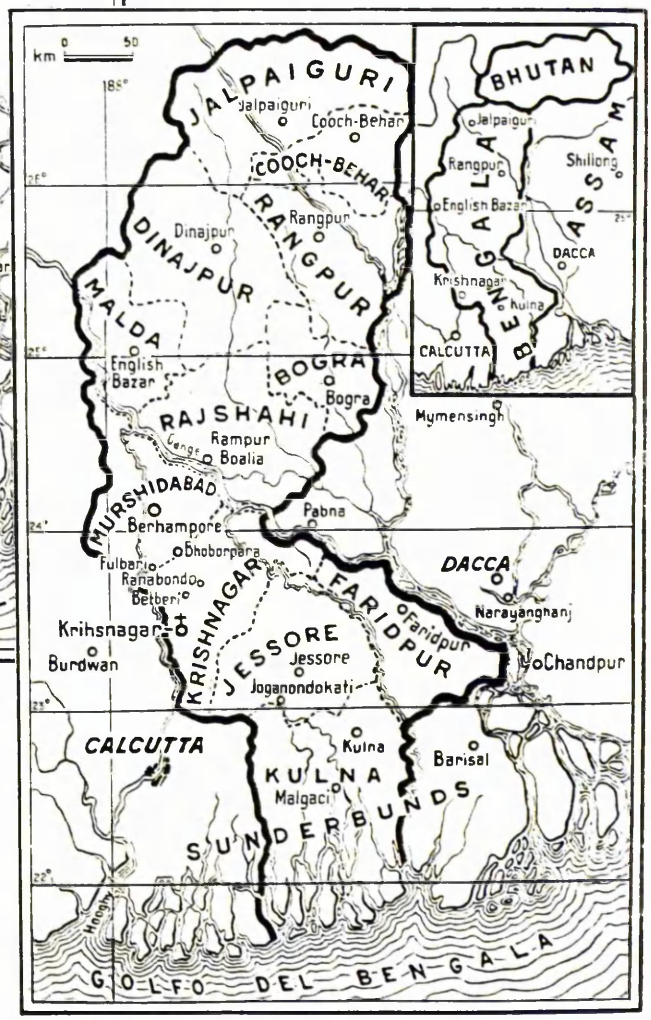
Court Cases, which occupy - particularly in Baradal - a prominent place in missionary sources, reveal a strong missionary commitment to the Rishi and a multipurpose way of establishing before the whole of society that the newly-adopted religion was rewarding the Rishi and fulfilling many of their aspirations. In times of crises these court cases improved the cohesion of the Christians, enhancing the chances of dialogue. At other times, the missionaries used them as a weapon to retaliate against those Rishi who, according to them, were the troublemakers within the group, leaving them to their fate when arrested. Despite corruption in the legal process, all in all, the use of civil law as a means of advancing and asserting the rights of the Rishi, has been functioning all these years .

Financial shortage became a problem for the missionaries, especially in times of distress, when Bishops and superiors could not satisfy everybody. The missionaries recognised the importance of 'money' for the 'Salvation of souls' and many of their letters and articles directed to the Catholics in Europe, give clear evidence of this. The Rishi, for their part, attached great importance to the fact that a missionary could dispose of large sums of money. This was for them a sign that the 'contract' was to be fulfilled; an interpretation not welcomed by the missionary, whose identity as a 'man of God' was put at risk by the humanitarian character of the mission, relegating him to the role of a relief agent.

In the brief account that follows of the Catholic missions among the Rishi in Bengal, I have attempted to keep chronological events to a minimum, concentrating on missionary methodology and ideology and on the Rishi response to Christianity in the context of the wider society. Given the richness of the sources, detailed notes are used to flesh out the text and to provide material for further reflection in both scholarly and missionary circles.



The Mission of Central Bengal (1855-1870)
(Source: Tragella 1950-63/1:368)



The Apostolic Prefecture of Central Bengal (1870-1886), and later the Diocese of Krishnagar (1886-1927).
(Source: Tragella 1950-63/2:447).

1. The Rishi and the PIME Missionaries in Jessore-Simulia: 1856-1927

Mgr. Marietti and the first Rishi conversions: 1856-1892

One year after reaching the Central Bengal Mission in 1855, Fr. Marietti began operating in Jessore. He belonged to a recently founded (1850) Italian missionary institution sponsored by the Bishops of Lombardy as a result of particularly active local clergy eager to restore missionary ideals. The first missionaries prepared themselves in a political climate of unrest and turmoil, where ideals of independence and liberation played an important role: some of them had participated actively against the Austrian presence in Milan.[1] The direct preparation for the mission field was carried out in the community life of St. Calocero Seminary through "prayer, study and priestly ministry".[2] The models followed by the missionaries were the martyrs of the Missionaires Etrangères de Paris (MEP), well-known through the Italian edition of MEP bulletins.[3] Italian Romanticism, with its strong accent on nationalism, served as the basis for their "heroic vocation".[4] These first missionaries brought with them to the field a "rather romantic concept of their Mission as a land of uncivilised, barbarous men.....The Indians were '*idolatri, infedeli e selvaggi*' for whose conversion their institute had been established".[5] This position was, however, destined to change and give place to a more open, understanding and sympathetic attitude, to the point of renouncing conversion as a precondition to 'salvation'.[6]

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1 Tragella 1950-1963/1: 4-5. One of them, Fr. Marietti, who will become "the Father of the Muchi", only a few years before leaving for the field (1853) had been accused by Card. Fransoni, Secretary of Propaganda Fide, of being particularly active against the Austrian Regime (See Fransoni, Letter to Ramazzotti, 15 Nov., 1853, *AME,* I, 123-4, quoted in Tragella 1950-63/1: 146).

2 Tragella, ibid.: 182. Apart from the study of the English language, no other particular subject was taught at this stage for the preparation of the missionaries.

3 Tragella, ibid.: 7. Tragella, speaking about missionary literature at the time in Italy, refers to three different types: one historical-descriptive, the other apologetical, and the third apologetical-polemic, the latter mainly directed against the Protestants.

4 Marietti, petitioning to become a missionary in 1851, will admit that he had participated in the Milanese revolutionary movements of 1848: " .... During 1848 I went to the battlefield and that hut and those dangers were, in my mind, the missionary's hut and dangers...". (See *AME,* XIII: 893, quoted in Tragella, ibid.: 34).

5 "... They did not seem to be in any way familiar with the niceties of the Hindu religion, its profound philosophical system, or the sacred books of the Hindus or Muslims. This in turn prevented them from understanding or appreciating the Hindu culture...." (Kottuppallil 1988: 67-8).

6 The very first group of missionaries who left St. Calocero to go to Oceania, wrote back to the Superior in Milan giving their impressions, which would serve to improve the "Regulations' of their Institute, according to direct experience in the field. They showed a high respect for the native people whom they considered " very perspicacious knowers of human internal feelings". The study of their language was to be carried out 'as a prayer to God' (Tragella, ibid.: 165).

Missionary ideology and methods of apostolic work

The initial approach of the missionaries, who set off to Jessore to 'save souls',[7] was certainly shaken by the reality they found there, since they soon realised that very few wanted to be converted and that the 'salvation' they offered was accepted only in socio-economic terms.[8] Muslim and Hindu soteriologies were sufficiently established to please both the high and the low social strata. This did not dampen missionary enthusiasm, but was considered by the missionaries as ignorance on the part of the 'pagans' of the 'True Religion'. Failing to convince the caste Hindus and the Muslims,[9] the missionaries were left to dedicate themselves to the Rishi in Jessore-Simulia and the Namasudras in Khulna and the Sunderbon.[10]

Despite the fact that Marietti "repeatedly experienced the difficulties involved in working with the economically poor and socially low caste people who, according to him were too hypocritical, selfish and sensual to accept Catholicism for pure motives" (Kottuppallil 1988:101), he remained firm in his decision to work with the Rishi. His journey to South India,[11] the unsteadiness of some[12] and the pride of others,[13] persuaded Marietti to focus his attentions on the Rishi. Other missionaries depended on him as the oldest missionary of the area, the superior in charge and the one who supported with his wealth - he belonged to a rich Milanese family - most of the running expenses of the mission. This led to a reaction among some of Marietti's collaborators who did not share his views on missionary methodology in general nor, more specifically, his dedication to the Rishi.

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7 The aim of evangelising the 'natives', rather than caring for the European Catholics, was shared by all the missionaries working in Central Bengal. This orientation "was never altered in the history of the Diocese of Krishnagar" (Kottuppallil 1988:113).

8 According to Fr. Longa, "the vast majority of Bengalis were too embedded in their religious beliefs to accept a religion like Christianity which destroyed their caste. The few who became Catholics did so for the material, moral and social enhancement of their lives. Conversions for supernatural motives were... almost non-existent" (Kottuppallil 1988:297).

9 Kottuppallil maintains that: "The inclusion of the out-castes in the Christian community kept the Hindus and the Muslims in certain parts of the [Jessore] district aloof from the Catholic faith" (Kottuppallil 1988:278). It seems, however, that the Rishi were the only ones to accept the missionaries' proposal. (Pozzi, '*Relazione ai Direttori dell' OPF di Lione e Parigi*', 25 Giugno, 1893, *AME* XIII:1792).

10 The majority of converts in Krishnagar District and other parts of the diocese belonged to the Namasudra and the lower Muslim castes (See Kottuppallil 1988:278).

11 After visiting the missions of South India in 1861, Marietti reported the impression of the Pariahs' faithfulness to Catholicism and he was determined to intensify his activity among the Rishi, 'the Pariah of Bengal' (Ghose 1898: 746).

12 The Satberry people, converted from the Baptists, had reverted later to their former Muslim religion: "... Henceforth a deep hatred against the Mohammedan religion grew in father Marietti and for this reason he never again worked hard for the [the conversion of] Mohammedans" (Ghose 1898:743).

13 Among these were the Brahmins and the Kharta Bhoja, a group of Hindu 'monotheists' (Cf. Kottuppallil 1988:8-10). Marietti met the headman of the Kharta Bhoja sect while touring the mission with Longa (Longa, Letter to Parietti, 27 Dec., 1861, Jessore, *AME* XIII:418).

Among Marietti's direct associates, Marzi, who resided at Jogodanandakati, "was unwilling to work for the Muchi population since that would prevent the caste people from becoming Catholics".[14] His predecessor at Jogodanandakati, Fr. Juliani, lamented that this community of ninety were Christians "for money's sake". They had been attracted in the past by donations and when these diminished, had accused Juliani of preaching a false doctrine, since, following conversion, they did not become wealthy like Europeans.[15] While Bertoldi opposed Marietti by favouring the apostolate among the higher castes,[16] Gazzaniga and Rigamonti, who had helped Marietti among the Rishi obtaining considerable results, finally left this mission frustrated by the Rishis' 'unfaithfulness'.

Marietti alone truly believed in the success of the Rishi mission at this stage, and he was the one with the power and means to make it work. This success was achieved by his strong personality and his ability to establish a personal relationship with the Rishi. He accepted the Rishis' limitations and excused them, while his concrete presence among them was a guarantee that the missionaries were fulfilling their 'contract'. When the Christians of Jogodanandakati protested that it was impossible to live according to the teaching of the Church, Marietti got his local catechist to translate the biographies of the apostles and other saints.[17] Later, when Juliani left Jogodanandakati, Marietti himself led this mission spending many days there at a stretch (Ghose 1898:752). He attached great importance to village schools and boarding schools (Kottuppallil 1988:101), and although not always successful in this venture, he certainly started a process which allowed the Rishi to come out of their isolation. The secret of Marietti's success lay, however, in his early decision to adopt "a simple Indian mode of living" (Ibid.: 300), which permitted him to be closer to his people and to become 'native'.[18]

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14 Kottuppallil 1988:197 (Marzi, Letter to Marinoni, 5 Oct., 1877, *AME* XV:559-564).

15 Juliani, Letter to Marinoni, 18 April, 1871, *AME* XIV:1399-1342.

16 Bertoldi asked eventually to be transferred to Krishnagar where he could dedicate himself to the study of Sanskrit and Hindu religious literature, in an attempt to fill a lacuna in missionary training, but unfortunately he never succeeded in this (Kottuppallil 1988:299-300).

17 These were published under the title '*Sadhu Charit*' (Lives of saints - Ghose 1898:750).

18 "..The Catholics here are all native and all baptised by us; we need strong young missionaries full of self-denial who, becoming natives, try to convert them" (Marietti, Letter to Raimondi, 2 Dec., 1868, *AME* XIII: 1081). This initial approach, applied by Marietti, as might be expected, to the ends of 'conversion', gave rise later to the missionary theology of 'incarnation' and 'inculturation', which was to be a key concept in the theory of missionary 'dialogue'.

Resisting the view that in catering for the Rishi others were prevented from becoming Catholics,[19] Marietti disapproved of Longa's plan to introduce caste into the mission[20] and, as Apostolic Prefect at that time, replaced him with Scatti.[21] This contrast was accentuated when in Bhabarpara (Khustia District), during 1877-78, Fr. Pezzotti accepted into the Catholic community many Protestants, who, in disagreement with their minister, wanted to observe caste distinctions, excluding the 'Muchi Christians' from their common meals.[22] Although Marietti did not oppose the conversion of the caste-conscious Protestants, he never changed his own policy in Jessore.[23]

The common ideal of "saving souls" shared by all the missionaries working in Central Bengal at this time was interpreted in different ways by individual missionaries, but overall, the urgency of conversions prevented the missionaries from establishing a dialogue with the people, since the Church's growth in number was considered a priority. In the case of the Rishi, dialogue was confined almost entirely to Marietti, who was known in the Jessore area as the "Muchis' Sahib". To become 'native' for Marietti did not, however, imply accepting caste distinctions among the Christians as proposed by other missionaries, for he had a great affection for the Rishi. As a consequence, the Rishi recognised him as 'their Father',[24] with all the implications such a title could accumulate in a relationship established, as the Rishi understood it, between rich and poor, powerful and powerless. It would seem that the Rishi demanded total acceptance of their way of 'being' from the missionaries: either they loved them or they did not. The result of this was a paternalistic attitude by the missionaries towards the Rishi and the acceptance, when it seemed to them appropriate, of Christianity by the Rishi.

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19 Fr. Limana, when superior of the whole mission (1864-1870), had prepared projects to begin a new apostolate among the caste-Hindus in Bograh District and had considered forming an indigenous Bengali clergy. None of this in fact came to fruition since natural calamities (famine of 1866-7) and his poor health prevented him from doing so. Longa, out of all the missionaries who worked in Central Bengal during this period, was indeed the one who researched most into Bengali society and missionary methodology (see Scurati 1887). The only way the church could gain people was, according to Longa, through works of charity. He noted, however, that all the charitable institutions in Central Bengal, since they did not observe caste regulations and followed Muslim food habits, tended towards the Muslim and low caste Hindu population. He "therefore offered practical suggestions regarding the foundation of a new refuge for Brahmin widows. He further wished to make a separate orphanage for the children of high caste Hindus" (Kottuppallil 1988:298).

20 "The question of castes and Indian rites is a very hot issue and, according to me, it is the weakness of those missions and those Christians. We, here, at least *in sacris*, do not have castes and I believe this is a great advantage" (Marietti, Letter to Marinoni, 4 June, 1862, *AME* XIII:1005).

21 Kottuppallil concludes that: "...The higher social classes continued to remain at a distance from the Central Bengal missionaries for a long time thereafter" (1988:299).

22 Kottuppallil 1988:88-89. The Rev. Vaughan of the CMS, who had arrived in this mission in 1875, "..... was horrified by the existence of competing groups of 'Hindu Christians', 'Mussulman Christians', and 'Mochie Christians'. The Mochies, being leatherworkers, were regarded as unclean by the caste Christians, were often excluded from the churches, and sometimes their children were left unbaptized as the pastors feared that any contact on their part with the 'Mochies' would offend the congregations" (Forrester 1980:89).

23 "Caste controversy could have been one of the reasons why the Calocerians did not work in the same way in the out-caste villages of Nadiya as they did in Jessore" (Kottuppallil 1988:300).

24 "As a pastor, he [Marietti] loved his Bengali flock deeply. He had the poor, the young and the outcaste close to his heart and they, in turn, considered him a true father" (Kottuppallil 1988:211).

Missionary perceptions of the Rishi

Rocca[25] summarises the missionary understanding of the Rishi after almost fifty years of Catholic presence among them.[26] From this it emerges that the missionaries were fully aware of their converts' situation, their socio-economic problems, and above all, that 'these poor had been chosen by God'. This same concept had earlier been expressed by Bishop Pozzi, presenting the Rishi as the strongest Catholic group of the Krishnagar Diocese since conversions were obtained primarily in the district of Jessore and "only among the Muchi", who were for this reason 'blessed by God'. [27]

Evangelical poverty as a blessing, has often been used and mis-used by Church leaders to decide on a plan of pastoral activity. The first Christian communities, which experienced poverty and segregation, presented a raw model and an ideal to be followed by 'those who are not' in society. In the case of the Rishi, segregation was pre-existent, and Christianity became stigmatised as a consequence of the Rishi accepting it. Thus in the eyes of the missionaries, the Rishi were 'those who are not' destined to confuse 'those who are'. The real problem lay in the fact that the Rishi, by accepting Christianity, hoped and desired to be part of 'those who are and have'.

Marietti was made to suffer for associating with the Rishi, and the same discrimination was applied to his catechist Ghose who, as a former caste-Hindu, felt called upon to explain the place of the 'Muchi *jati*' in society, and the origin of their segregation.[28] By referring clearly to their dirty environment (*moyla thaka*), Ghose reveals not only his feelings of resentment for being treated as 'Muchi',[29] but also the prevailing attitude at that time, and the future hostility of caste Christians to Rishi converts.

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25 Fr. Franceso Rocca went to Bengal in 1892, the year of Marietti's death.

26 "[This is]...a very low caste and despised by everybody. The proper job of this caste is that of skinning dead cows and cattle which are thrown away by other people; they then sell the skins and sometimes they consume the carcasses' rotten meat. At other times they are not satisfied with the beasts that die naturally; they poison them, and for gaining a skin they ruin the cattle's owner. Due to the repugnant job they perform and the fact that they kill other people's cattle, they are avoided and despised by everybody else. Not all the Muchi are skinners; many of them are farmers. Since they belong to the same caste they are equally despised. But the Lord is delighted in choosing *ea quae non sunt ut confundant ea quae sunt*, and today the majority of Christians in the Jessore District are Muchi" (Rocca'Cenni sulla Missione...' , *AME* XII: 986).

27 "... These Muchi belong to the lowest class in society: they are cobblers and skin dealers. Some are musicians. These poor Muchi, despised and abhorred by everybody else, are blessed by God....At present they are 700, and every year, little by little they are growing in number" (Pozzi, *'Relazione ai Direttori dell' OPF di Lione e Parigi'*, 25 June, 1893, *AME* XIII: 1793-4).

28 "In Bengal the Muchi are the lowest *jati* of all. Their behaviour and dwelling houses are very dirty. The local gentlemen close their noses for fear of stinking smell when they pass by the Muchis' houses. If one looks upon the different aspects of their nasty behaviour, one can easily guess that they are a very mean *jati*" (Ghose 1898: 742).

29 "The local catechists had to undergo much hardship due to their visit to the Muchis' homes because people of other *jati* believed that they too were Muchi. The people of the high *jati* looked down upon the catechists and would not allow them to enter their houses or to touch anything" (Ghose 1898:742).

The strongest attacks against the Rishi came, however, from those missionaries who lived among them. Juliani, for instance, lamented that the 'converted' Rishi "... were still much influenced by material interests and idolatrous practices. Their use of incantations and magical rites to cure those bitten by poisonous snakes shocked him".[30] Marzi, after refusing to work among the Rishi, proposed to open schools for the high caste Hindus at Berampore because the latter were "different, civilised people...more solid and capable of noble sentiments".[31] Although this perception reveals the general missionary attitude towards the Rishi, Marietti's feelings prevailed and when the missionary sisters re-opened their convent in Jessore district in 1887, Simulia was chosen, as the Rishi were the "group more open to the Gospel".[32] This was the view that prevailed and after Marietti's death, Fr. Nava stayed among the Rishi for thirty-seven uninterrupted years.

The Rishi response to Christianity

The Rishi of Jogodanandakati, being the first to be converted directly from 'paganism',[33] received Marietti's special attention, and he would spend much time offering them solid religious instruction and material help.[34] The story by Obert[35] of their conversion gives an appropriate 'myth of origin': two men in need of a judge to settle their quarrel who then find a missionary to help them reach a solution, is a feature often present in the history of the group. Rocca's story likewise reveals the confusion in the Rishis' mind about different Christian denominations: they were looking for the representative of the foreign rulers' religion and were satisfied in finding Marietti; however, their confusion persisted since, twelve years later (1871), Juliani lamented that he was still mistaken by the Rishi for a Protestant minister.[36] Apparently, for the Rishi 'religion' was not the important issue, since they needed to find someone to help them in their daily struggle for survival, and although 'religion' became the common ground for dialogue between the Rishi and the missionaries, and 'conversion' was the term of the contract, they were understood very differently by the two parties. An

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30 Kottuppallil 1988:195-6. See Juliani, Letter to Marinoni, 26 June 1871, *AME* XIV: 1343-46.

31 Marzi, Letter to Marinoni, 5 Oct., 1877, *AME* XV: 559-564.

32 Kottuppallil 1988:234; Tragella 1950-1963 / 3:119.

33 Rocca, 'Cenni sulla Missione....' , *AME* XII: 986-7 (quoted and followed also by Kottuppallil 1988:104).

34 Obert, 'Brevi cenni....', *AME* XXXI/12: 4.

35 See, Obert 'Spigolature Storiche...', *AME* XXXI/20: 35-40.

36 Juliani, Letter to Marinoni, 26 June, 1871, *AME* XIV:1343-46.

interesting digression made by Ghose, on the conversion of the Jogodanandakati people,[37] clarifies both the position of the Rishi and the missionaries, revealing the essential nature of a dialogue based on a contractual exchange.[38] Another persistent feature, as reported by Ghose and Rocca, is the Rishis' need to 'convert' as a group or a group of villages rather than as a single village, reflecting the nature of their social structure (the 'confederation' of 27, 13 and 11 villages).

The accounts of the Simulia and Beniali 'conversion'[39] show the role of the leaders in the 'conversion' of the group, typifying a situation which will persist during the whole history of this mission: the need for certain leaders to ally themselves with the foreign missionaries in order to increase their power within the group, and the advantage taken of this by the missionaries to appoint the leaders as catechists, in an attempt to unify religious and social powers. The leaders were also to play a primary part in the abandonment of Christianity and here too it was the internal struggle for power that determined their decision. The protection sought by the Rishi is yet another characteristic feature which, in certain cases, discloses the infrastructure of the whole dialogue: by putting themselves into the hands of the missionary, the Rishi chose him as their representative before society. The missionary, by accepting this paternalistic role from the very beginning, risked perpetuating the long established situation of dependence of the Rishi on outsiders. The Rishi, in their turn, were not 'converting' or 'changing religion', as the missionary thought, but only changing over from an 'astute and clever master' like the brahmin or the zamindar, 'who knew them too well', to a new, more sympathetic and, most of the time, very naïve master, the missionary. The term 'conversion' used by the narrators of these facts, is a purely conventional definition, to be soon dismissed by one missionary (Longa) who realised that "conversions for supernatural motives were .... almost non-existent" (Kottuppallil 1988:297).

Soon the Rishi realised the difficulty of following a 'religion' which contained too many obligations and in 1868 we witness the first mass defection of the Jogodanandakati Catholics and their catechist. The causes for defections were normally given as the yearning for one's caste fellows, the pressure of relatives, the difficulty of arranging marriages within the small group of converted Christians, strict moral discipline or simple misunderstandings among Christians. For the Rishi, however, the causes were also to be found in their occupation as skinners of dead animals: not satisfied

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37 "The British missionaries [Protestants], out of kindness and sympathy for the poor and distressed new Christians, started giving them some money at times. On seeing this the local people began to think: ' What is this? The priest in our country get honorarium from the worshippers, but what we see in this case is exactly the opposite! Under this system, the worshippers get honorarium from their priests. Therefore there must be some way for the priests to get that money'. As a result the majority of the villagers thought that the priests would get some one or two hundred rupees for making just one Christian; out of that money the priests gave only ten or twenty rupees to the new Christian and the rest went in their own pockets.....The British missionaries wanted to do good to them but ultimately they did the opposite" (Ghose 1898:740-1). Ghose noted earlier that money, gold and silver were given only to 'kings and priests' in the East.

38 This would then explain Juliani's indignation when his Christians, after 'conversion', wanted to be rich like the Europeans.

39 See Rocca "*Cenni sulla Missione...*', *AME* XII: 988; Obert, '*Spigolature Storiche...*', *AME* XXXI/20: 38-40.

with the animals that died from natural causes, they gave poisoned leaves to cows, oxen and buffaloes in the fields.[40] In fact, not all the Rishi, once Christians, "left this vile job that associates them with the vultures and jackals" to work in the fields or in the bamboo industry.

These first missionaries had opposed the Rishi occupation as skinners,[41] not only on moral grounds, but also as a 'purifying process' to help the Rishi overcome their 'unholy' situation. The Rishis' attachment to their occupation, however, proved deeply rooted, and after the conversion movement in and around Simulia during 1880-88, a mass 'apostasy' took place, showing how shallow was the attraction of their new 'religion'. The reason for this abandonment was once again ascribed to their occupation and to the need of practising it as a group.[42] At times the Rishis' desertions were characterised by violent reactions, as in the case of Kamarpara[43] and Gadkhali.[44] Marietti, however, excused the Rishi, forgiving them and appealing to the other missionaries for patience.[45]

Marietti's poor health in his last years also contributed to the Rishis' defections, as his personal commitment to them weakened. It seems that, although the missionaries emphasised the importance of the Rishis' conversion to a religion, represented by the Church community, the latter privileged 'conversion' to a single missionary, on the model of *Guru-Siso* (Master-disciple) affiliation. In other words, both groups interpreted the situation in terms of their pre-existing religious categories. This is confirmed by the return of many Rishi to Christianity when Nava, following Marietti's suggestion, re-visited their villages, and invited them to Simulia, initiating a new personal relationship with them.

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40 "... For the sake of earning five rupees, they kill an ox which is valued at one hundred rupees..... Those Muchi who converted without renouncing this evil practice, this has been proved by experience, never persevere in their faith" (Obert, 'Spigolature Storiche...', *AME* XXXI/20, 43-44).

41 The missionaries were opposed also to the profession of music players, since this involved the participation of the new converts in 'pagan' religious festivals. (Ghose 1898:740; Pozzi, '*Relazione ai Direttori dell' OPF di Lione e Parigi*', 25 June, 1893, *AME* XIII: 1793-4).

42 Pozzi, ibid.:1795, states: " Since this [poisoning of cattle] cannot be accomplished by a single person, but by an association of people, it is very difficult for an individual to isolate himself to elude these unjust practices".

43 Obert gives as an example the case of Kamarpara where the village leader wanted to marry his son with a 'pagan' girl, and through a 'pagan marriage' ceremony. Through the Marriage Meal (*bara khana*), he and his family would had been accepted back into the old *samaj* and many other people would have followed him. So it happened that one night the brahmin of the group was called to perform the matrimonial ceremony. Fr. Rigamonti could not stop it and pronounced a curse on the leader's house (Obert 'Spigolature Storiche....' , *AME* XXXI/20: 47).

44 It seems that the straw-roofed chapel at Godkhali had been set on fire by some Christian Rishi who wanted to leave Christianity. Rigamonti brought charges against them but all of them were set free and all the new Christians returned to their former religion (Ghose 1898:759). According to the old Christians of Simulia it was the same catechist who set fire to the chapel (Obert 'Spigolature Storiche....', *AME* XXXI / 20:48).

45 Marietti, Letter to Marinoni, 22 Nov., 1889, *AME* XIII: 1511-13.

The Protestants among the Rishi

From the outset, Marietti expressed his desire for a good catechist to help him in his apostolate among the villages outside Jessore, far from the influence of the Protestants and the Brahmins.[46] His aspiration was motivated by the presence there of the Baptists who by that time had become very strong and active in Jessore and did their utmost to drive him out of the city.[47] The Baptist minister Anderson lamented the methods used by the Catholics to seduce his followers[48] and reported a conversion movement among the Rishi of the Jhikargacha area soon after the 1857 Mutiny.[49] Four years later, however, the Rishi "one by one drew back or joined the Catholics....",[50] presumably in the hope of more substantial material help.

Marietti, on the other hand, was on good terms with Mr. Fox, a minister of the Anglican Church, who, before returning to England, entrusted his flock to him. Given the presence of Protestants in the area, Marietti decided to write a book in 1860 to help the growing faith of his Christians, entitled '*Sat Sakrament*' (The Seven Sacraments), which is mainly a confutation of the 'errors' of Protestantism.[51] The missionaries' constant preoccupation with defending the 'purity' of the Catholic faith, meant they sometimes adopted an aggressive attitude towards every other faith, generating a dogmatism in respect of the fundamental doctrines, interpreted most of the time in a western way. During his long stay in Jessore, however, Marietti had learned how to sustain a dialogue with the different social and religious communities, since, as reported by Ghose, all these groups were represented at his funeral (Ghose 1898:762). This did not prevent him from using a strong hand with the Brahmins and the landlords when these did not permit the Rishi to become Christians, for fear of

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46 Marietti, Letter to Marinoni, 4 April, 1857, *AME* XIII: 991-92.

47 Ghose 1898:736; Kottuppallil 1988:101; Rocca, op. cit., *AME* XII:985. According to Kottuppallil (1988:20) ".....the Baptists had established themselves well in Jessore by 1804.....By 1850 Jessore and its vicinity could boast of about 213 Baptist church members and 470 Christians".

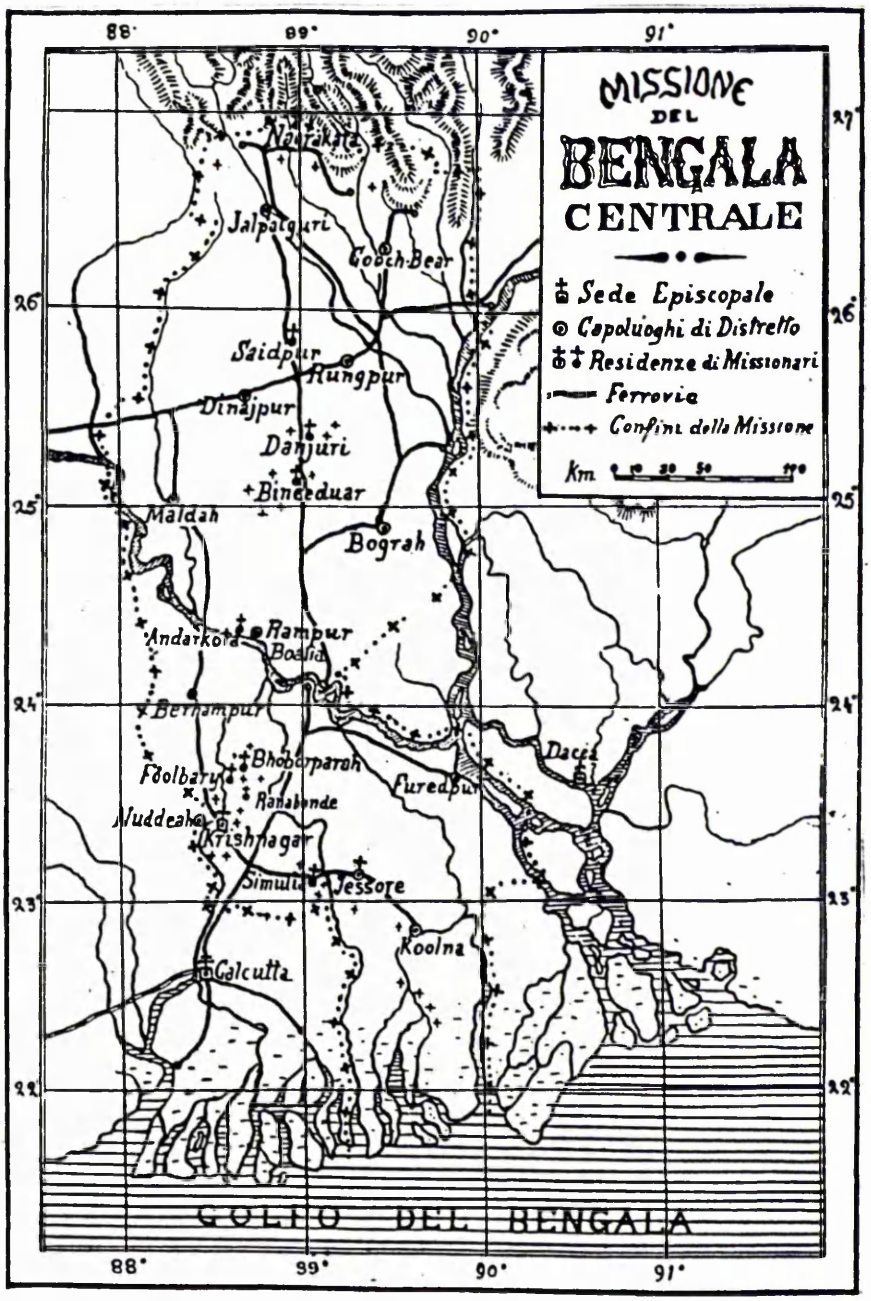
48 Indeed, many of the Catholics in Jessore District, especially among the Namasudra in Khulna, the Sunderbon and Faridpur, were former Baptists. "In 1860 Anderson was joined by another missionary, Hobbs.... They complained bitterly against the Catholic Mission workers in Jessore who were trying to seduce some Baptists from their allegiance, using financial incentives. The Catholic indifference to the moral character of their members was violently criticised, but the complaint finishes with the conclusion that most of those who had left as a result of such inducements were of very doubtful character anyhow, and were really not much loss..." (Soddy 1978: 49).

49 "Anderson also wrote from Jhigerhachi [Jhikargacha] about a movement among 'muchis' in the area. This group of low-caste Hindu weavers were described as timid but willing.... He explained that though these people were technically muchis by caste, i.e. untouchable leather workers, in fact they worked as weavers and generally speaking were in good circumstances... Technically they may be 'muchis' in the Hindu caste organisation, but to this day they are employed in various other trades beside weaving - especially bamboo - and also in ordinary farming. Their villages are listed in the report as "Boneyalli, Semlingopynathpur, Talore, Bodhekhanbali and Modullalli on the banks of the River Kobbadak, all in Nadia district (sic)" (Soddy 1978:47-8).

50 "... The movement among the Muchis four years ago has been unfortunate in every way. They saw money spent on chapels and houses, and concluded the missionary had inexhaustible funds. They one by one drew back or joined the Catholics, leaving only one family who are really pious" (Anderson's report of 1861, quoted in Soddy 1978: 51).

51 Obert, 'Spigolature Storiche...', *AME* XXXI/20: 41. This book enunciates in the first chapters the doctrine of the Church about each one of the sacraments. It then contains some chapters about the Virgin Mary, the cult of the saints, the infallibility of the Pope, and the journey of Saint Peter to Rome.

losing cheap labour. All in all, it seems that for the missionary, the dialogue which started with the Rishi had expanded to a dialogue with the wider society, requiring an open and flexible approach.



The Diocese of Krishnagar in 1913
(Source: *Le Missioni Cattoliche* 1913: 108)

Simulia during Fr. Nava's period (1892-1924)

By 1886, Fr. Rigamonti had converted the whole village of Simulia and had visited up to 15 other Rishi villages.[52] The Prefect Pozzi, informing Marinoni, the superior in Milan, of the progress among the Rishi villages, wrote: "the news about the Muchi of Simla and vicinity is very consoling. The number of those who want to be catechumens is growing."[53] The Sisters of Charity of Lovere, who left Jessore in 1886, a year later opened a house at Simulia and from there they toured the villages of that mission, particularly the Rishi villages, since these were the people more open to the Gospel (Kottuppallil 1988:234).[54]

> Simulia was gradually developed into a mission centre to cater specifically to the outcastes, while Jessore was to minister to the caste-Christians. As long as Marietti was alive he continued to serve both the communities without any distinction. Nadiya (Khrishnagar) on the other hand had no outcaste communities in its mission registers (Ibid.).

On 28 September, 1886 the work of these missionaries was crowned by *Propaganda Fide* with the elevation of the Apostolic Prefecture to Diocese, and Francesco Pozzi on November 24th of the same year was nominated first Bishop of Krishnagar (Ibid.: 258-261).

In 1886, Fr. Nava arrived at Simulia to help Rigamonti in his apostolate; they had to assist around one thousand new converts dispersed in 15 villages.[55] Fr. Rigamonti, following the Easter of 1886, received among the catechumens more than 20 families and asserted that, if at Simulia they were joined by other missionaries, they could easily succeed in converting four or five thousand people.[56]

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52 Ghose 1898:759. Among the villages mentioned by Ghose are those of Kagmari and Bodkhana where missions were established. A list of 12 villages (Amdoba, Fatepur, Godkhali, Shelkhona, Basantapur, Potpara, Panisara, Gabrapur, Burusbagan, Kalagachi, Mahiskura, Nirbbiskhola), was visited by Rigamonti. The Register of Baptisms of Simulia Parish on the year 1886 gives the following village names: Kagmari, Andoba, Azimpur, Loccampur, Iste, Bodkhana, Mohescuna, Pallu, Manicali, Kamarpara, Simla (old name of Simulia), Gotkhali, Ayampur, Goumpara, Busbagan, with a total of 185 Baptisms (See *SPA*, '*Liber Baptismorum*', vol.1).

53 Pozzi, Letter to Marinoni, 1 Feb., 1886, *AME* XIII: 1750.

54 Cf. Tragella 1950-1963/ 3:119. When the Sisters were removed from Jessore, the girls of the boarding school could not go to Krishnagar "because of the low caste of Jessore Muchi, and those girls cannot live together with the girls here (Krishnagar), unless they stay in a separate dormitory and a separate refectory" (Pozzi, Letter to Marinoni, 6 April, 1886, *AME* XIII: 1778).

55 *Le Missioni Cattoliche* 1886:222/511, quoted in Tragella 1950-1963/3:113. While Tragella maintains that the missionaries cared for 30 Rishi villages, Marietti says that the Christians were scattered in 15-16 villages. He adds also that the nuns were working in those villages for the instruction of girls and women (Marietti, Letter to Marinoni, 28 Sept., 1886, *AME* XIII:1457-59).

56 *Le Missioni Cattoliche* 1886:511, quoted in Tragella 1950-1963/3 :112.

On 3 December of the same year, Bishop Pozzi administered baptism in Simulia to more than a hundred adults.[57] In 1888, under the supervision of Fr. Nava, a new church was built in Simulia.[58]

Missionary ideology-methodology and missionary perception of the Rishi

Fr. Nava, who has been regarded as "the soul of the Muchi mission" (*SAT 1*: 2), can certainly be considered the main protagonist in the missionary dialogue with the Rishi during this period. He spent 37 years among them, touring the villages during both the dry and rainy seasons, taking particular care of the poor with whom he readily shared his food and clothes; he used to visit prisoners, and above all those condemned to death for whose rescue he would pay. His Christians, being poor, relied on his protection especially against the exploitation of zamindari and *mahajons* (money-lenders).[59] He was sensitive to situations of injustice and always spoke harshly against the perpetrators and for this, even the Muslims and Hindus feared and respected his authority. However, the real strength of this missionary, according to the narrators, lay in the many hours he spent praying in the mission chapel.[60] Despite his zealous activity, his dedication as a man of God was certainly noted by the Rishi Christians, who still remember him, and who, though in need of a rich minister, recognised the presence of a '*guru*' among them.

In 1914, 164 people were baptised in Simulia mission, out of whom 90 were converted from 'paganism'.[61] That same year a terrible cyclone had destroyed the entire village of Beniali,[62] while prices had doubled in Bengal due to the war in Europe (1915-18), and rice was scarce because of a poor crop.[63] The mission registers report for the period 1914-15, a total of 1407 Christians in the mission of Simulia and Jessore, scattered in 32 villages. The biggest community was in Simulia with a total

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57 Tragella 1950-1963/3:112. In the Note (34) Tragella refers to the impression given by a visiting missionary from Burma who stated that the 108 newly baptised were very well prepared after one year of catechumenate.

58 The old chapel, built by Taveggia, was going to be the new house for the sisters and a boarding school for 35 girls. The inauguration day was Easter of the same year in which 400 Christians participated together with the fathers Rigamonti and Nava (Tragella 1950-1963/3:119. Marietti, Letter to Marinoni, 29 April, 1888, *AME* XIII:1491).

59 Belgeri 'Note storiche sulla Missione del Bengala Centrale', *AME* XXXI/1:153.

60 Obert 'Spigolature Storiche...', *AME* XXXI/20:52.

61 Nava 'Breve resoconto della Missione di Shimulia', 30 Nov., 1914, *AME* XXXI/1:573-583. This report is one of the few testimonies left by Nava who did not seem very keen on writing about his missionary apostolate in spite of his 38 years' experience in the field, all of which were spent in the mission of Simulia.

62 Costa, Letter to Taveggia, 18 May, 1914, *AME* XXXI/11:1187-9.

63 Castelli, Letter to Armanasco, 5 April, 1915, *AME* XXXI/11:119-122.

of 327 people.[64] Many conversions were registered during the following period (1917-1921) among the Rishi villages, especially in the Betna river area.[65] The mission registers of Simulia report for the year 1917, a total of 1189 Christians (300 in Simulia) distributed in 30 different villages.[66]

A brief report by Fr. Nava in 1914[67] contextualises well the Simulia mission during this period: the three missionaries there (Nava, Castelli and Costa) were "united and in good harmony....for the spiritual and material well-being of this little portion of the divine flock", and good work was being carried out by the four Sisters of Charity.[68] With one father remaining at Simulia, the other two would visit the additional 22 villages. Many other villages, though not moved -Nava writes- only "by purely spiritual reasons", were well-disposed to accept Christianity, but the lack of material means hampered the prosperity of the mission.[69]

Fr. Costa, who worked in Simulia between 1911-28, continued a style of presence among the Rishi similar to Fr. Nava's,[70] and this taught him to appreciate their inhuman situation and their poor social condition[71], giving him reason to believe that by converting to Christianity many of their problems might be solved. Furthermore, for him the Rishi represented the humble and oppressed exalted by God's grace: "They have discovered that they too are human beings, that they too can inherit Paradise and that they too have God as their Father and as such they want to be respected."[72] Thus for

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64 "*Status Missionis*"- Simulia & Jessore, 15 Aug., 1915, *AME* XXXI/1:983-5. Taking into account that the Christians of Jessore and the Sunderbans reached around 300, the 'Muchi' community of Simulia was well over 1000 Christians.

65 *SPA, 'Liber Baptismorum'*, vol.1, 1859-1931. The villages of Ghiliphul, Brusbogan, Noapara and Bowal, registered some baptisms during 1917; Nirluskola, Moiscuro, Dolda, in 1918; Moipara in 1919 (16 baptisms were administered in this village by Fr. Wauters, a Jesuit from Calcutta working at that time in the Satkhira mission. This was repeated in 1921 in Jogodanandakati). It had even been possible to convert some Muslims in the Guadalpur area, but the reaction of their fellow Jati people compelled the local authorities to remove the catechist from their midst (Costa, Letter to Armanasco, 26 Feb.., 1917, *AME* XXXI / 11:1199-1201).

66 *SPA, 'Status Animarum'*, 15 Aug., 1917, File 'Sacred Returns', s.n.
The Christians of Jessore and the Sunderbans were 801, distributed in 11 places. The biggest community was in Malgaji with 123 people, then Chunkuri with 71. In Jessore there were only 61 Christians.

67 Nava, 'Breve resoconto della Missione di Shimulia', 30 Nov., 1914, *AME* XXXI /1:573-583.

68 These sisters were in charge of the schools, the orphanages, the widows and medical assistance and they, too, willingly left their convent to visit the village communities for the instruction of women and children.

69 Nava, 'Breve resoconto della Missione di Shimulia', 30 Nov., 1914, *AME* XXXI /1:582-3. The desire of having more catechists to help the missionaries was shared also by Fr. Castelli who had previous experience in Bhabarpara and Krishnagar (Castelli, Letter to Armanasco, 1 March, 1915, *AME* XXXI /11:117-8).

70 "..... He adapted himself to life in the Muchis' huts, put up with their rough manners, excused their ignorance and offered their ungratefulness to the Lord... He defended them against the vexations and extortions of the land-owners, and helped them when they needed to apply to the court. The title of "Father of the Muchi" that everybody gave to Fr. Costa was indeed well deserved" (Obert 'Spigolature Storiche...', *AME* XXXI /20:53).

71 "The Muchi, because of their job as skinners and carrion eaters, are compared to vultures, dogs and jackals, so that to be a Muchi means.... to be a vulture, a dog or a jackal" (Costa, 'I Miei Mucci', *Le Missioni Cattoliche*, 1913:159).

72 Ibid.

Costa 'conversion' and social uplift represented one and the same reality, in line with Nava's idea of 'spiritual and material well-being' of the Rishi.

Fr. Costa's concern on the occasion of many Rishi conversions during 1919, did not end at administering baptism: "The number of children has increased," he wrote, "and we have to feed them now." He found himself compelled to ask directly for help from the superior in Italy because Bishop Taveggia, "though happy when many become Christians, turns a deaf ear to the expenses that follow this".[73] The following year, Costa's viewpoint was not changed, and to the good news of 150 baptisms among the catechumens, he responded that "life has become extremely expensive....It is impossible to carry on with only 270 Rs. per mission. We hope things will change...".[74]

His hopes of obtaining good results were always accompanied by his fear for the Christians' unsteadiness,[75] up until Nava's death, when the Rishi were abandoning Christianity altogether. The 'many disillusions' he suffered among his Christians put an end to a dialogue which had been conducted from opposite perspectives: the Rishi accepted him as 'father', when the fatherly figure could provide them with food and protection, but were ready to abandon him when these were no longer needed, and they could re-join the bigger family of the '*Sanatan Dharma*'.[76]

Fr. Castelli too played a major role in the Rishi mission during this period. Shortly after transferring from Krishnagar, he toured the mission of Simulia in order to get to know the "*giri chor* (petty thieves) Muchi", and reported his impressions of the Rishis' unsteadiness.[77] He would ensure the Rishis' faithfulness with unorthodox methods, leaving a more kindly approach to Fr. Costa.[78] In 1924 Fr. Castelli reported on the Simulia mission[79] and after historical explanations of the Rishi mission, he advances the reasons for their conversion to Christianity: belonging to a low caste and

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73 Costa, Letter to Armanasco, 20 Oct., 1919, *AME* XXXI/11:1184-5.

74 Costa, Letter to Armanasco, 28 Aug., 1920, *AME* XXXI/11:1207-8.

75 Costa, Letter to Armanasco, 12 Sept., 1916, *AME* XXXI/11:1198.

76 The missionary literature of this period refers to many Hindu political-religious movements being created in Bengal with the intent of re-converting Indians to Hinduism. (see: ' I Gandhisti contro la propaganda cattolica', *Le Missioni Cattoliche*, 1925:58; Curioni, G. 'Un nuovo pericolo per le Missioni in India - Tentativo di rinascita dell'Induismo', *Le Missioni Cattoliche*, 1927:49-50; Rocca, F. 'L'Indianizzazione degli Intoccabili', *Le Missioni Cattoliche*, 1927:319-321).

77 ". . . All Indians are the same; some come and others go...." (Castelli, Letter to Armanasco, 13 July, 1914, *AME* XXXI/ 11:112).

78 " ... There is the need to have a strong hand and to give a slap every now and again" (Ibid.:113-4).

79 He answered a questionnaire which was directed to the missionary districts of the Krishnagar Diocese (Castelli, 'Questionario ai distretti, 1924 - Missione di Simulia', *AME* XXXI /1:789-802).

hence abused, the Rishi had found in Marietti a strong protector. This, however, prevented caste Hindus and Muslims from accepting Christianity.[80]

Despite his opposition to the apostolate among the Rishi, Castelli also seeks to justify the less than brilliant results of this missionary district. According to him, Simulia and Jessore were paying the price for a scarcity of missionary personnel, since whenever a missionary was needed, he was taken from here.[81] It was certainly better, in his view, not to convert people to Christianity, if they were afterwards to be neglected.[82] Reasons for the conversion of the Rishi are still related, as Castelli writes, to their need for protection.[83] Most often it was a group of families which converted, at other times also individuals. If there were many families, a catechist was sent to instruct them, otherwise they were called to stay in the central residence (Simulia). Generally the catechumenate lasted from 6 months to a year. They were not very persevering and mass defections were quite frequent, but nevertheless in some villages a growing spirit of proselytism was noted. At the end of his report, Castelli reiterates the main reason, according to him, for missionary failure among the Rishi group.

> If it were possible to look after them more, and the missionaries were not changed so frequently, some progress could be possible and maybe even this despised race (*schiatta disprezzata*), the Muchi, could enter the fold of Christ.[84]

Castelli's judicious observations contrasts with the more passionate attitude of Fr. Costa, who, when offered leave by the Bishop, refused to visit Italy because his Christians were too attached to him. He wrote, ".... they are like children in their faith, and if I abandon them they could disperse".[85] Castelli's remarks about 'easy conversion' of the Rishi point to his awareness of the situation which had been created in the past, and which still continued - a situation where 'conversion' for the missionaries and the Rishi held a different meaning. His interpretation of 'religion-protection' shows an equally intuitive perception of the reality involved in the Rishi-missionaries encounter: reading and reflecting upon the past history of this mission, helped him to understand and focus on central issues. More than any other he stressed how the PIME missionaries had retired before time from the Rishi

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80 "(They) could be easily converted, but it was not possible to do anything else because Muslims and high caste Hindus, seeing that we associated with the Muchi and converted them, did not accept Christianity.... The apostolate was in difficulty from having accepted people of a low class (schiatta bassa), from the very beginning" (Ibid.:793).

81 "This could be the reason why there has been slow growth and the Christians are not steady in their faith" (Ibid.:796).

82 Castelli, Letter to Armanasco, 1 March, 1915, *AME* XXXI /11:117-8.

83 "Generally speaking these poor people subjected to vexations ask the Father for help, and it is here where religion enters in" (Castelli, 'Questionario ai distretti, 1924 - Missione di Simulia', AME XXXI /1:798).

84 Ibid.:800.

85 "....Caste is the primary obstacle in obtaining conversions and even though it is no longer as powerful as in the past, it is still very strong, and this year for this reason I had many afflictions...and some defections among the neophytes" (Costa, Letter to Cagettini, 3 Sept., 1926, *AME* XXXI /11:1211-1215.

mission, taking personnel from there when needed in other parts, and making dialogue even more difficult, if not altogether impossible.

This period of 35 years, which might have been one of stability and consolidation of the Rishi mission, resulted in doubt and insecurity until the final decision of the PIME missionaries to opt for a more rewarding mission-field (Appendix 4). The hopes of Bishop Pozzi, who in 1893 had described the Rishi as the only group who had converted to Christianity,[86] were soon overshadowed by the new conversions obtained in the Northern region among the Tribals. The very missionaries working among the Rishi saw their hopes of building a mature community dashed. Costa's enthusiasm was exhausted at the end of 17 years among the Rishi,[87] while Castelli reiterated the old idea that the failure of that mission was due to the very first choice made, viz., the apostolate among a group of Untouchables.

While the Rishi mission of Simulia was experiencing many difficulties, Fr. Macchi in the northern mission of Bhabarpara in 1925 had started an intensive apostolate among the Rishi of that district.[88] If the feelings of the former Protestants were not changed towards the Rishi, the missionary attitude had indeed changed, but their first choice marked the future development of the mission among the Rishi in that northern district, who never adopted Christianity in great number.[89]

Further friction in the Simulia mission arose from the relationship between the missionaries and the Bishops (Pozzi and Taveggia). Although partly due to a clash of temperament, the missionaries were also divided among themselves on missionary methodology. During this second period the discussion was not so much about methods, as about scarcity of means and personnel, and to whom these should be directed. Ultimately, the missionaries unanimously decided, despite the efforts of the superior in Italy (Fr. Manna), to dedicate themselves to the area where missionary activity would be reciprocated. The example set by Marietti and followed by Nava, had been continued by Costa, but he himself felt in no position to advocate the cause of his beloved "Muchi".

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86 Pozzi, *Relazione ai Direttori dell' OPF di Lione e Parigi,* 25 June, 1893, *AME* XIII: 1793-4.

87 Costa, Letter to Risso, 24 Sept., 1928, *AME* XXXI /11:1217-1218.

88 Macchi, G. 'Il risorgimento della missione tra i paria del mio distretto', *Le Missioni Cattoliche*, 1925: 129-130; 257-260.

89 There is a small group of Rishi in the Bhabarpara mission even today, as a result of Macchi's apostolate: they have never been able to become fully part of the Christian community or interact with them to a satisfactory degree.

The Rishi response to Christianity

If it had been difficult for the missionaries to 'convert' a small group in 40 years, it proved even more difficult to keep them in the Catholic faith. After the first movement of 'aggregation' to Christianity, a further step was needed to make dialogue meaningful in a way that '*Dharma*' and 'Christianity' would become intelligible for both the missionaries and the Rishi.

Apart from the Protestants who, with their money, were tempting the Catholics away from their faith, there were also natural calamities and disasters, which combined to test the new converts' loyalty, given their endemic poverty. In time of need and distress they could not expect help from their lost *samaj*: indeed they had abandoned it when seeking survival. Either way, the missionary had become for the Rishi their 'Father', from whom they expected help and protection (cf. Tragella 1950-63/3:264), thus developing a mentality of complete dependence. Such a frame of mind was certainly favoured by the missionaries' own paternalist tendency in relation to their 'children'. This position was adopted by the missionaries not only in religious matters, but also in every sphere of life. Natural disasters and chronic poverty gave the missionaries the difficult task of dealing incessantly with those most harshly affected, for they felt a moral obligation to remedy the situation by spending considerable sums of money. The description given by Ghose is still applicable here: these new Christians discovered that the 'religion' coming from outside, was able to solve many of their daily problems. The equation conversion=protection/money, had been suggested by the missionaries themselves,[90] and the Rishi had clearly accepted the exchange. Nava's complaint that many did not 'believe in Christianity for purely spiritual reasons' appears out of place in this context. It points to one of the recurring 'contradictions' of the missionary ideal: 'conversion', though presented as a spiritual gift, needs the support of more tangible subsidiary gifts. Among these, the need for protection from the oppression of the other groups, was certainly significant.

The unsteadiness of the Rishi in their 'new religion' raises the question once again of the real value they attached to it, and the lack of awareness on the part of the missionaries, with the possible exception of Castelli. The Rishis' conversion was for the missionaries of utmost value: it was certainly better to have a bad Christian (who could be saved), than a good heathen, for whom there was unquestionably no salvation at all. However, some doubts must have infiltrated the missionaries' mind since Castelli, at least, expressed the opinion that it was better not to convert at all, if afterwards these people were neglected.

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90 Fr. Castelli eagerly accepted the offer of many villages to become Christians, subject to the condition that they be helped against an ex-policeman who was keeping them under his yoke (Castelli, Letter to Armanasco, 13 July, 1914, *AME* XXXI/11:113-114).
"If we had money we could attract many to become Christians, but we cannot care for those who are already Christians", Fr. Macchi wrote from Bhabarpara when for two years it did not rain properly and the crops failed (Macchi, Letter to Scurati, Jan. 1897, quoted in Tragella 1950-1963/ 3:265).

The Rishi, for their part, felt abandoned when Fr. Nava died and even more so when the PIME missionaries left this territory for a more promising field. Once again, the Rishi felt free to break the terms of their 'contract', which they understood in personal terms, since the missionaries had not kept their side of the bargain. Dialogue thus proceeded slowly and, indeed, for many Rishi villages, it ceased altogether until a later date, when the Rishi would find someone among the new missionaries, the Salesians, willing to establish a new relationship.

During this period the most crucial issue facing the missionaries was the financial situation of the mission which conditioned many of their choices, including the troubled partition of the Diocese and, as a consequence of this, the abandonment of the Rishi Mission. The missionaries working in Simulia-Jessore echoed the concern at this difficult financial situation expressed by Bishops Pozzi and Taveggia. The Rishi mission had suffered a great setback in this respect after Marietti's death, who, with his private means, had supported the entire mission in Jessore district.[91] Fr. Picchi, writing to his superior in Milan, expressed feelings common to many missionaries working in that area:

> It is of no use to say that we need to expand our activity, because all missionaries have this desire. Believe me that without money we cannot move a finger. There is lack of money and we cannot expect to receive help from these people.[92]

Nava too, had repeatedly lamented the lack of funds which impeded any real progress of apostolic work, especially for the maintenance of more catechists who could have helped the Christians in the many villages.[93] Later, Castelli and especially Costa, regretted that they could not attend to their Christians properly for want of money.

Missionary interest in social uplift was motivated by the idea that with 'conversion' to Christianity, people also had to improve their external appearance, and if poverty was 'blessed' as a first step towards conversion, it was no longer needed afterwards. The missionary policy of "looking after the souls without forgetting the bodies"[94], was imposing itself more and more on missionary methodology and ideology. The distinction between body and soul gave place to a less dualistic interpretation when the missionaries could see very little of the glory of God in the tormented bodies

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91 Some years before dying Marietti had financed all of that mission supporting the missionaries, sisters, catechists, schools and the construction of houses and churches (Rocca 'Cenni sulla Missione del Bengala Centrale', *AME* 12,988-9). Marietti had willed that, after his death, his brothers would pass 12.000 Lire to the mission of Jessore (Tragella 1950-63/3:268. See also Scurati, Letter to Scarella, 3 Dec., 1892, *AME* XXXI). This money, however, some years later managed to cover only half of the expenses incurred by this mission and the diocese had to contribute 22,000 Rupees (Pozzi, Letter to Scurati, 17 Jan., 1900, *AME* XIII:1818g).

92 Picchi, Letter to Superior, 2 Jan. 1906, *AME* XXXI /15:83-86. "Here we have now a terrible famine- Picchi wrote- and it is not destined to end soon. We are 'assaulted' by those who seek help. Fortunate is the missionary who can save himself spending as little as possible..... During a period of famine, it is only with money that I can make them return" (Picchi, Letter to Gazzaniga, 28 Aug., 1906, *AME* XXXI /15:105-6).

93 Nava, 'Breve resoconto della Missione di Shimulia', 30 Nov., 1914, *AME* XXXI/1:576.

94 'La prima Visita Pastorale di Mons. Taveggia ad Jessore', *Le Missioni Cattoliche*, 1907:30.

of their new Christians. The daily dialogue with anguish and suffering did certainly help the missionaries to 'convert' themselves to a new vision of reality which, far from being an alienating understanding of spirituality, became grounds for the future concept of 'Salvation', seen as salvation of the human being in his totality.

After seventy-one years' presence among the Rishi, the PIME missionaries had little to show in terms of concrete results: the dedication of some to the group was neutralised by the unwillingness of others. Wants of means and personnel during the whole period contributed to the final decision to abandon the mission (see Appendix 4). The Rishi shared in this else ups and downs, but for some Christianity presented an alternative to make life less unbearable. Fr. Costa, who was still in Simulia at the end of 1928 introducing the Salesians to their new place of work, betrays a feeling of disappointment towards the mission and the people with whom he had spent seventeen years: "I do really need to go back home for a while to boost my morale; I had too many disillusions during these years among these Christians of mine, and I do feel really tired....".[95]

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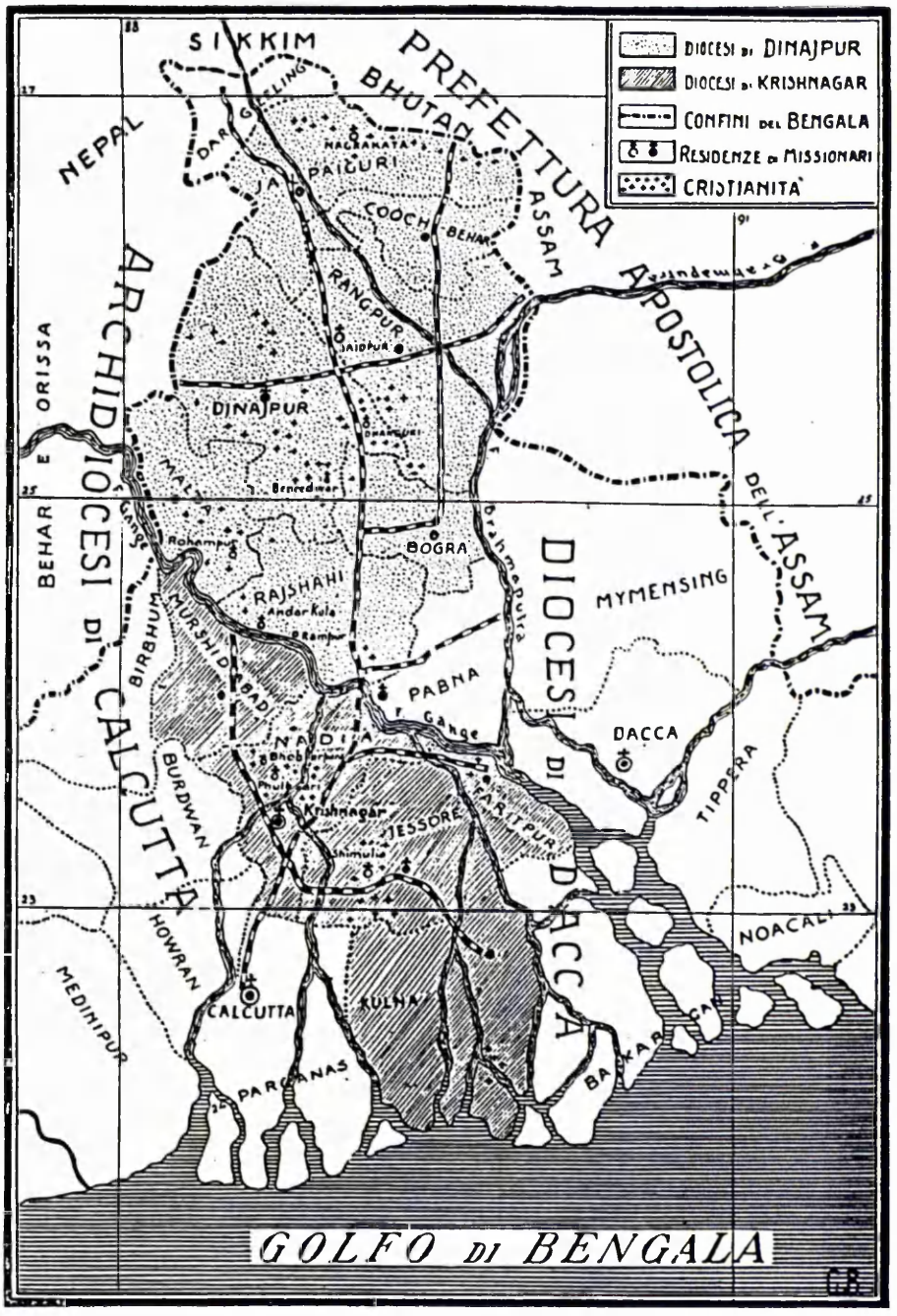
95 Costa, Letter to Risso, 24 Sept., 1928, AME XXXI/11: 1217-18.



The Dioceses of Krishnagar in the South (Salesians) and Dinajpur in the North (PIME) in 1927.
(Source: *Le Missioni Cattoliche* 1927/15:226)

2. The Salesians among the Rishi: 1928-1952

The Salesians, who in 1928 replaced the PIME missionaries to remain in Simulia until 1952, were interested from the outset in giving solid 'religious' training to the Rishi (many of them had returned to Hindu practices), following the model of the Italian Church as valid to be "transplanted" in a Bengali-Rishi environment. A pamphlet published by the Salesians during this period[1] bears on its cover the symbol of a hand carrying a torch surmounted by a luminous cross, signifying the light of the Gospel. The biblical quotation: "*Illuminare his qui in tenebris et umbra mortis sedent*" sums up a widespread missionary programme leaving very little space for dialogue.

Wanting to restore the Rishis' religious life, 'religion' became the 'meeting place' of the missionary-Rishi encounter, but while both used *dharma* to designate religion, each group attached to it a different meaning. Catholic Religion was for the missionaries the only True Religion; other 'religions' (Islam and Protestantism) were 'unable to give Salvation', and Hindu practices were only the result of Satan's work. Only much later were all religions officially recognised as 'means of Salvation', and acceptance of this has been paved by many moments of dialogue, not excluding those between the Salesians and the Rishi in Simulia. The former learned that, for the poor, 'religion' might signify their only way of obtaining a respectable place in this life, let alone in a future one.

Missionary ideology/methodology and missionary perception of the Rishi

In the first few years of Salesian presence in Simulia, the missionary in charge, Fr. Sanna, repeatedly draw attention to the abandonment of the Rishi Catholic communities: many had left Christianity either returning to their former religion or not practising any at all,[2] the few remaining Christians were not very fervent[3] and "cold and indifferent towards the church"(*SIM.*1:52). Sanna, however, recognised that these Christians had been abandoned by the missionaries and that by multiplying their visits and caring, especially for the youth, it would be possible perhaps 'to obtain more' (*SIM.1*:6).

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1 '*From the Heart of Bengal*' n.1, Sept.- Oct. 1937:2.

2 Visit to Jogodanandakati and Deuli 9-13 January 1931, *SIM. 1*:4-5. Visit to Dumria 9-14 Feb., 1931: " The village was all Christian once, now only two-three families are left. The others, even though they did not return to pagan practices, do not follow the Christian doctrine" (*SIM. 1*:8).

3 This was the case of Gongadarpur, Bodkhana, and the centre of Simulia (*SIM. 1*:6/7/12).

One problem at the heart of this situation was "the want of proper instruction in religious matters"; presumably this had not been adequately given during the previous 73 years of PIME missionary presence. A silent 'antagonism' between the two missionary groups emerges and any credit given to the Milan Fathers for their efforts was soon overshadowed by later criticisms.[4] This conflict, extended to material possession,[5] often hides the more subtle opposition of divergent ideologies and missionary methodologies and it certainly reveals a strong contradiction in missionary identity at this stage: the prime concern for the "salvation of souls" being closely related to the pride of the group who achieves conversions. The relationship the missionaries sought to establish with the Rishi, was vitiated from the start by the lack of unity between different missionary groups and at times also between individuals of the same missionary institute.

The solutions proposed by Sanna show a commitment to the 'spiritualization' of the problems, implemented by an emphasis on religious practices such as novenas and particular devotions, in keeping with Salesian communities and parishes in Italy.[6] Since in the Sunderbon the Catholics were more fervent and well-disposed, Sanna thought of launching there a fund-raising programme to build a new chapel for the Rishi dedicated to Don Bosco, founder of the Salesians, so that devotion to the Sacred Heart "might awaken these people's apathy". As a result, the missionary willingly visited the "fertile ground" of the Sunderbon communities (*SIM.1*:76/31/23), while the Rishi had to go to the mission centre of Simulia if they wished to keep in contact.[7] This strategy resulted from a meeting of all the Salesians in Krishnagar where they decided that "the pass word is 'to wait'; we must not push, or be in a hurry [to convert]" (*SIM.1*: 29). The policy of waiting meant in practice to sever all dialogue with the Rishi, betraying the character of an encounter merely oriented towards 'conversion'. The 'blessed poverty' which had prompted the Rishi to discover the Divine Grace, was turned into a curse upon them: "The punishment of God lies heavy upon these poor souls like a bad destiny."(*SIM.1*: 52).

Fr. Marocchino's impression, when he arrived at Simulia in 1935 to replace Fr. Sanna, summaries the state of the Rishi mission during that period:

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4 " In spite of all the efforts of the Milan Fathers, several villages of the Simulia District, inhabited by untouchables [Rishi], apostatized and returned to Hinduism. It was a sorrowful happening. The want of proper instruction in religious matters, the inconstant character, their abject poverty, the continual contact with Hindus and Mohammedans, the abandonment in which they felt they were left owing to the missionaries being unable to visit them often, account for their apostasy" (*From the Heart of Bengal* 1937/1:2).

5 These feelings of competition were accentuated when Fr. Sanna, describing the Centre of Simulia, lamented that the PIME missionaries had taken with them many vestments, altar cloths and even the bells from the church and all the furniture from their residence (Ibid.). Strangely enough, when in 1952 the Xaverians took over from the Salesians in Simulia, they too lamented that the Salesians left the mission barren.

6 These included the devotion to Mary Auxiliatrice and to the Sacred Heart, with the celebration of the First Friday of every month (*SIM. 1*:23-4).

7 The Christians of the 11 outstations of Simulia used to go to Simulia for Christmas, Easter, Corpus Christi and the Patronal feast of the Rosary, to participate in religious functions with the rest of the community (*SIM. 1*:38/61/92).

> These Christians see many missionaries passing through, which results in their apathy. They act as people without a guide. They themselves reveal that nobody is able among them to act as a leader, and that never are they able to agree among themselves. Their desire is for the father to run the entire village, like an absolute monarchy, since they confess their inability to establish a self-governing ruler. We will spend time studying the situation, the people and environment, so that we can decide accordingly (*SIM.1*:99).

It was the missionaries' policy of centralising social and religious power that resulted in this absence of leadership in the Rishi Catholic *samaj*. Eighty years of Christianity had not only failed to give the Rishi the dignity which was denied them by others, but was also destroying their self-respect vis-à-vis the other Rishi. Such complete dependency shows how dialogue could be manipulated and reality mystified: the promise of achieving the liberating paternity of God did not free the Rishi from the ambiguous and enslaving paternity of the missionary.

Marocchino pursued developments in two directions. On the socio-economic side he sought to intensify educational activities, especially for the young,[8] and to introduce the local industry of weaving.[9] He also wanted to re-establish the authority of '*panchayat*' leaders to direct *bicar* and keep order in the village.[10] He was not tempted by an 'absolute monarchy' which the Rishi, according to him, would have preferred, but with the help of well-intentioned leaders, working "in harmony with the Father for the progress of the village", he expected good, quick results (*SIM.1*:108). Alongside this, Marocchino wanted to maintain the 'spiritual line' established by his predecessor[11] and give sound religious instruction, and this indeed characterised the main thrust of his programme. He was also convinced of the benefit for the Rishi of furthering relations with all Christians of the Diocese, "although being of different castes" (*SIM.1*:109/110).

Marocchino was a victim of the situation he himself had condemned and after one year, in 1936, he was replaced by Fr. Lazzaro. The latter, however, was in the advantageous position of having to care only for Simulia and the Rishi villages, since another missionary, in charge of Jessore, attended the communities of Khulna, the Sunderbon and Faridpur.

Free from other commitments, Fr. Lazzaro started visiting the Rishi villages, especially those that had once been Christian. Although he felt sympathy for these Christians, who had indeed been

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8 Evening and night classes were established to favour the participation of young people who worked during the day (*SIM. 1*:104).

9 *SIM. 1*:101-2. The Simulia area Rishi, despite being called 'Muchi', were apparently 'Hindu weavers', according to Anderson, the Baptist minister who missionised them during the 1850s (Soddy 1978: 48).

10 Fr. Marocchino wrote on that occasion: "This is badly needed; this lack of authority in the village has been in the past the main cause of many troubles, and of the little progress of this village" (*SIM. 1*:118-19).

11 These included devotion to the Sacred Heart and to Mary Auxiliatrice (a 'Maria Ausiliatrice *Samaj*' was established for the girls in Simulia - SIM.1:102), and the association of Christian Mothers: there were 20 members in this association called 'Karmel *Samaj*', with the main purpose of showing a good example and furthering Christian education of the children (*SIM.1*:105/107).

abandoned by the missionaries,[12] he was also very dissatisfied that "they did not appreciate the invaluable gift of faith and Redemption",[13] and "turned pagan for futile reasons"(*SIM.2*:12). "Many years will pass," he wrote, "before refining their manners and civilising these degraded people"(*SIM.2*:7). The idea of *dharma* as understood by the missionaries is, once again, at the centre of a dialogue which will be interrupted every time an individual missionary divorces himself from the Rishis' own interpretation of *dharma*, and the kind of redemption they expected from the missionary. When Lazzaro described Deuli as "the village of ungrateful apostates", after they refused to rejoin Christianity, he was understanding their lack of faith entirely in his own terms;[14] on the contrary, he reserved words of appreciation for those few who remained "faithful to Religion unto death, practising the Commandments of God, and the precepts of the Church" (*SIM.2*:6).

The missionary activity of Lazzaro incorporated both the policy of his predecessors and a more dynamic and innovative commitment especially towards the non-Christian Rishi. He started a rice bank and a monetary bank "to escape the oppression of the Indian usurer, the Marwari"(*SIM.1*:123), and tried "to eradicate those works considered degrading and uncivilised to other people".[15] This complemented his desire to build "a new *para* for those not wanting to stay among these Christians, since the others come from Muslim groups or a different caste" (*SIM.1*:127). On occasions when some Muslims would ask to become Christians he put to himself...

> ...the big recurring question: to become Christian does it imply to become Muchi? There are no other Christians apart from Muchi in this area! This is the big mistake. Can this be eliminated? (*SIM.2*:8).

Even allowing for Lazzaro's concern for expansion of the Church to other groups, one cannot ignore the contradictory nature of his position. It seems that, though able to become children of God, the Rishi were not 'clean' enough to live among other Christians. Even as the missionary tried to persuade the Rishi to pursue 'eternal values', he could not reach them as long as he failed to recognise the ordinary human values to which the Rishi did not have access. On a spiritual-religious level, the Rishi, as Christians, were blessed by God and the only ones destined for 'Eternal Salvation', but on a

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12 Visiting Beniali, Fr. Lazzaro observed that the chapel was far away from the village, in the middle of the jungle (*SIM.* 1:116). Speaking about Gongadarpur he admitted that they were: " Poor people! No well, no pukur where they can take a bath, no church where they can pray, and this for more than seven years!" (Ibid.) Looking for the apostates of Notunpara, Dumria, Motkura, Tangra and Selkona, he saw that these old Christians "were left to their destiny, abandoned, and they went back to their idols. They were not been visited since Fr. Costa's times, a matter of 16 years..... they are willing to come back" (Ibid.:116/126).

13 This was particularly referred to the apostate villages West of Simulia on the River Betna: Kerarkali, Chata and Bara Bashantapur, Manikali, etc... (*SIM.* 2:5).

14 " Their decision is a refusal of the Religion which enabled them to be sons of God and offered them the inheritance of Heaven." The Deuli village leaders after praising the PIME missionaries, Nava and Costa, "from whom they received a lot of money", refused to re-join Christianity "defending themselves behind the decision of the Panch-jon, ...the head of families" (*SIM.2*:20).

15 SIM.2:5. Lazzaro decided on this line of action against the suggestion made by the Apostolic Administrator, Scuderi, who, wanting to give to the people of this mission means of social uplift, proposed creating a slaughter-house and a tannery in Simulia (*SIM.* 2:3).

human-social level they were defined by Lazzaro, who shared in this case the view of Muslims and caste Hindus, as "very ignorant and uncivilised".[16]

Lazzaro's orientation in the religious sphere was motivated by the presence of many apostates among the Rishi Christians, who had lapsed "for lack of solid religious instruction and good catechists" (*SIM.2*:5). He did not approve of mass-conversions[17] and, as a solution, favoured a spirituality modelled upon the scheme of Salesian parishes and communities in Italy.[18] Despite this, Fr. Lazzaro dedicated all his energies to the 'conversion' of this group: he repeatedly visited Kagmari, "the real Muchi centre", hoping to persuade them to embrace Christianity (*SIM.1*:129); he sought permission to work among the Rishi of Satkhira District,[19] and followed with interest the "Movement of Untouchables and Depressed Castes that was shaking Hinduism" during these years. He also prepared some catechists with the particular intention of sending them among the non-Christian Rishi (*SIM.2*:73/76). Furthermore, he came to realise that Muslims and Namasudra were not very sincere in their intention of 'converting' to Christianity.[20]

On August 15th, 1937, the Simulia mission was visited officially by the Apostolic Administrator, Mgr. Scuderi. In his concluding remarks in the mission diary he praised all for their achievements, but registered some 'deficiencies', in particular the lack of missionary interest in the social life of the people.[21] Scuderi's suggestions represented a turning point for the Simulia mission, and even though missionary methodology was still strongly 'conversion-oriented', they introduced a new kind of dialogue focusing on those very issues abandoned by the Salesians during this period. 'Religion', in its spiritual dimension of 'sacramentalization' and devotionalism, was not enough, according to Scuderi, to guarantee a real encounter between the Rishi and the missionary. Dialogue, to be effective, should

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16 "We should remember that the Christians of this area are very ignorant and uncivilised, excluding a few, since they belong to the Muchi caste". This explanatory note was given by Lazzaro on the occasion of the Presidency-Assembly elections of 1937, when 43 Rishi went to the polling station of Jhikargacha. The Officials praised the Christians "who finally show that they too are civilised" (*SIM.* 2:14).

17 "The mass-decisions are a big gain (spiritual of course), and at the same time a great danger, since as they come en masse, they also leave en masse. Under this aspect, individual conversions are to be preferred for their substance and for the time they have to absorb religious instruction" (*SIM.* 2:6-7).

18 He established organisations of Catholic women, Catholic youth, Scapular sisterhood, and the '*Oratorio Festivo*'. To establish a 'festive oratory' in every village was, according to Lazzaro, the aspiration of every Salesian (*SIM. 1*:130/140; *SIM.2*:37).

19 These at the time had been abandoned by the Calcutta Jesuits (*SIM. 1*:136).

20 After visiting Kanarali (16-5-1936), Lazzaro reports that 12 Muslim families wanted to become Catholics: " They want a bank, meaning loans, a school cum teacher, jobs for some of them... The reason is money, material help, not religion!" (*SIM.1*:136-7). He expressed also this opinion about the Namasudra of Bongaon and Kalianj: "There is little to hope from these Namasudra since they want to become Christians only because they want material help" (*SIM. 2*:133-4).

21 "..... I think we should be more interested in the social and civil life of the people. The contact with the Father in matters not pertaining to Religion is lacking. If I am not wrong, I see the need for us to be interested in them, their difficulties, quarrels, cleanliness, illnesses etc..... The Christians do not have a social life with the missionary. ..... There is a disproportionate number (at least 95%) of illiterate people. This has enormous consequences for the whole running of the community both from a religious and a social point of view....." (*SIM. 2*:45).

incorporate all aspects of life especially those which constituted daily problems in the life of the Rishi; in other words, dialogue for him was about people and about life. His observation that the Christians "do not share a social life with the missionary" point to the limitations of the missionaries, who were so preoccupied with building a small theocracy for the 'eternal salvation' of the Rishi, that they forgot the people and the contingent salvation expected by them. Scuderi's approach can be seen as anticipating a new understanding of 'salvation', accepted as a reality for the totality of the human being.

Following Scuderi's visit, it was Fr. Sergi who joined Simulia in January 1937, caring particularly for the Rishi Christians, while Lazzaro increasingly concentrated his activity among the 'apostates' and the non-Christian Rishi. In Simulia and out-stations, the missionary followed a pattern of religious instruction, with some success on certain occasions such as Good Friday,[22] but generally he was still faced with "poor participation and interest" and "only with the children was it possible to obtain something". Furthermore, the Christians found "great difficulty in going to church and receiving the Sacraments". According to Lazzaro, the Christians of Botkhana "felt the importance of the Christian festivities less than the influence of the pagan feasts in the nearby bazaar", and the Christians of Kamarpara "seem to have a curse over them; despite attention and care, men and women remain cold..." (*SIM.2*:56/59/65/97). While the leader of Jogodanandakati was not "a good example to the community, practising exorcism and preparing *maduli*", the Simulia leaders were urged to remind parents about their duty to send children to school at a time when many non-Christian Rishi were demanding a school for their children (*SIM.2*:74/87/93). It seems that the 'spiritual' line taken by the Salesians did not help the Christian Rishi to value one of the greatest advantages that conversion could offer them. In addition, it is possible that the leaders did not favour schools as a medium of control over the group since these were monopolised by the missionary.

Meanwhile Fr. Lazzaro, invited by the Baptist teacher Probhat Komar Chowduri, who was "interested in the moral uplift of the Muchi of Kaligonj and nearby villages",[23] visited this community speaking to them

> .....about the Catholic Religion and the civilisation it spread in the world, about education and uplift which will follow if he [Probhat Master] firstly and the Muchi later, become Catholics.....

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22 "They feel the mystery of this day very deeply... the death of Jesus ...adoration of the Cross ... Stations of the Cross..." (Good Friday 15-3-1938, *SIM.* 2:86). "Today's Rites have attracted more people in Church: the Adoration of the Cross started by the Priest, barefoot and followed by the people is a function which makes a big impression. The Passion was read in Bengali... " (Good Friday 7-4-1939, *SIM.* 2:141).

23 Probhat Master hoped "to establish a mission whose main purpose would be the education and elevation of a huge number (10.000 he says) of Muchi living in different villages distributed from Churamonkati to Jhenida, from Kaligonj to Roshchandopur" (*SIM.* 2:70).

Despite the "domination over the Muchi"[24] of Kashi Datta, an influential Hindu, Fr. Lazzaro wanted to meet the Rishi leaders who would be willing to send their children to school should the Catholic Mission establish one in Kaligonj (*SIM.2*:75). Furthermore it was agreed, despite Kashi Datta's indignation, that some promising boys would go to the school in Krishnagar.[25] The Rishi leaders, however,

> .... speaking of Religion, will not abandon the doctrine of the *Boisnab (Gosh-para Mot)*[26] but believe that they can call themselves Christians and still follow Hindu traditions. Eventually, we will succeed in passing on the true meaning of Religion....[27]

This encounter typifies a new stage in the Rishi-missionary dialogue. Here a large group of relatively successful Rishi, interested in the education of their youth, accepted the missionary's offer without promising their 'conversion': they seemed to have found a place in the Hindu community and, much as they valued education, they did not hesitate to recall their children from Krishnagar when they realised they were being given meat to eat (*SIM.2*:95). In these circumstances, it would take a long time for Lazzaro to give them his "true meaning of religion" and, while his initial perception of these Rishi was similar to that of the Simulia Christians, in need of 'education and civilisation',[28] he was later greatly impressed by the unity among the Rishi leaders of that area, and by "the great interest and seriousness with which they spoke about religion".[29] These 'Muchi' were, according to him, "more educated and civilised" and inspired more confidence. Lazzaro had great hopes of converting them and had already financed a school in Chapalipara outside Kaligonj, despite "opposition from Hindus and Muslims" (*SIM.2*:108/81). The school, however, was set on fire on April 15th 1939, and one month later Fr. Lazzaro, for safety reasons - war had broken out in Europe - was confined to the residence of Simulia with the other Italian Salesians.

Lazzaro's attempts at 'group conversion' met with more success among the Noapara Rishi, who contacted him early in February, 1939, asking to be protected from the Muslims. He had tried many times to 'convert' them in the past without success, and on that occasion sent them back, to return only when they would agree to convert. Following a meeting with the leaders, Lazzaro was impressed

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24 Kashi Datta was "the owner of the Syndicate of Transport Services of Jessore-Jhenida-Chuadanga ..... He gave work to two educated young Muchi (Murari Das and Kiron Das), supports the School in Kaligonj and helps the Muchi in their feasts and *Pujas* giving them cars, tents, lights etc..." (*SIM. 2*:75).

25 This was done so that "they will be able in future to attract their relatives to the True Religion" (*SIM. 2*:81).

26 The name was given after the place where their *guru* resided (*SIM. 2*:75).

27 *SIM.* 2:90. At a later date Lazzaro commented that; "On the whole we can understand that the Muchi are willing to have their children educated, but they do not like to change religion" (*SIM. 2*:93).

28 "..... We see a small Zamindar who applauds the idea of building a school at Chachra so that the Muchi can become educated and civilised....." (*SIM.* 2:93).

29 Nilmonj, the *Neta* of Kaligonj, took much interest "in wanting to know what was discussed and decided by the Muchi of the other villages" (ibid.).

by the "interest in religion and submission of the Muchi" and decided "to proceed with a Court Case to subdue the Muslims" (*SIM.2*:126/127). The latter, however, put their trust in the Muslim Daroga of Jhikargacha, and "relied upon the instigations of Jiten Datta, a Hindu who saw in the Father a rival for supremacy over the Noapara Muchi". Eventually the Muslims accepted a compromise declaring themselves guilty, and signed a paper promising not to persecute the 'Christians' (*SIM.2*:132/140).

The Noapara case highlights a style of encounter which had previously proved effective in the Simulia mission: Noapara was "the centre of many other small villages" and, though Lazzaro was against the idea in principle, it presented the possibility of 'group-conversion'.[30] This placed the missionary in direct competition with Hindus and Muslims:

> ....The Hindus by losing this caste would lose thousands of votes at election time. The Mohammedans hope to convert them to their own religion, as they have done with many outcastes in other districts....[31]

Although this last possibility was very remote, - the Muslims never dreamed of converting the Rishi - the situation was still very complicated and required a total commitment from the missionary to the cause of the Rishi and an involvement in their social problems which went far beyond the simple 'conversion/aggregation' to Christianity. On this occasion, Lazzaro developed an awareness of the Rishis' human and social situation, anticipating what later would be called 'election for the poor and the oppressed'. As Lazzaro used to preach to his catechists, "... it is the Lord who converts, not us" (*SIM.2*:50), and God must have effected a conversion in the heart of the missionary, if, after suffering and struggling for and with them, he wrote to his friends : "Pray for me and for my dear Untouchables".[32]

During 1937-39 Fr. Lazzaro had become so involved with the Non-Christian Rishi of Kaligonj, Bongaon and Noapara that, by the end of April 1939, Mgr. Scuderi relieved him of the charge of Simulia and 'the old Christian villages',[33] entrusting them to the care of Fr. Sergi, so that Fr. Lazzaro could dedicate himself completely to the 'Evangelization of the Pagans' - the Rishi of that area. War in Europe, however, led to his internment and put an end to his dream.

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30 "...Should we succeed in establishing a good Christian centre there, in a short time, all the surrounding villages would come to us" (Lazzaro, *From the Heart of Bengal,* March-April, 1939:9).

31 Ibid.:8

32 *From the Heart of Bengal,* Jan.-Feb., 1939:10.

33 The list of these villages was provided in the diary: Jogodanandakati, Beniali, Bodkhana, Gongadarpur, Berinarampur, Ulusi, and Gillapole. (*SIM.* 2:147)

The Rishi response to Christianity

The Rishi response to Christianity must be assessed with reference to three distinct Rishi groups: the Christian Rishi, the 'apostates', and the Non-Christian Rishi.

As early as 1929, Fr. Costa had written a report on the Rishi's abandonment of Christianity,[34] a state of affairs which declined steadily in subsequent years.[35] By the time Fr. Sergi took charge of Simulia, in 1939, there were only seven villages left[36] with a total of 675 Catholics.[37] Accused of 'unfaithfulness and disloyalty', the Rishi justified their position: "Father should visit us, take care of us, and we will come back to the practice of religion.... he must come to see us, to protect us from the exploitation of the Muslims"(*SIM.1*:119). Indeed Lazzaro was well aware that 'protection' had been the condition of the agreement, a condition which he himself adopted with the Rishi of Noapara and Nagarchaprail.[38]

Missionary presence among the Rishi had been the guarantee that they belonged to a new *samaj* or, at least, that this process had been started, and at worst they would return to their old *samaj*.[39] These former Christians needed someone to whom they could refer as a focus of their identity and their sense of belonging, since without *samaj* one is less than nobody, even if Untouchable. Those Rishi who had remained Christian were judged "very poor and ignorant" (*SIM.1*:111) by the missionary, "those least interested in the life of Jesus",[40] and those who returned "to works which were reputed degrading and uncivilised".[41]

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34 "..... All the Muchi villages within a range of 40 miles around Simulia had been instructed in our faith, declaring themselves Catholics, but later they apostatised. Even now when these Muchi are in danger, they declare themselves Catholics, and many still remember their prayers and the verities of faith which they use as a passport for receiving help..." (Costa, reported by Sergi in Aemulanimi, 1939:84).

35 While in 1922 there were 49 villages with a total of 1607 Christians, in 1928 the villages decreased to 25 and the Christians to 868. One year later, in 1929, when the Salesians started working in Simulia, the villages were reduced to 19 with 780 Catholics (Ibid.).

36 Ibid.:85. The villages are: Simulia, Beniali, Botkhana, Gongadarpur, Berinarampur and Ulusi.

37 *SPA*, File 'Sacred Returns' *(Status Animarum)* s.n.

38 "...[The Rishi of Noapara] Being persecuted by a Muslim and by a Hindu nawab, asked the missionary for help. The Father promises them protection and assures them that nobody will do anything against them, if they will sincerely embrace the Catholic Religion" (*SIM.* 2:130).

39 "... In the middle of the village they have built a hut where they placed the Hindu idols. What a desolation!! They say they have been abandoned and they could not resist the pressure and vexations of the other apostates" (Visit to Deuli 23-1-1936, *SIM. 1*:118).

40 Visit to Botkhana with the picture-projection of the life of Jesus: "the Hindus of the area were very interested.... only the poor Christians seem at times the least interested" (*SIM.1*:108).

41 SIM.2:5. The Christians of Beniali were implicated in the killing of cattle (SIM.2:4), and those of Botkhana "bought a dead cow for 18 Rupees which they kept in their houses for five days, to eat at their pleasure"; and "still they have the reputation of poisoning cattle and the like" (*SIM. 1*:103/109).

Many of the Non-Christian Rishi visited by the missionary gave, on the contrary, a different impression altogether: at Sunanondi, "a nice, clean and ordained village.... they did not seem Muchi" (*SIM.2*:6); at Kagmari "the real centre of the Muchi..... it seems that they do not want to be called Muchi any longer; they have abolished all low caste habits and beg for education; now they are dedicated to agriculture and the cattle trade like other castes. It seems they are trying to become Muslims" (*SIM.1*:128); at Kaligonj the Rishi children were attending school with the Muslims and the Hindus. Meanwhile the Christians of Jessore on a visit to Beniali refused to eat with the Christians of that village, because these were 'Muchi' (*SIM.2*:125/24).

There was close communication between Christian and Non-Christian Rishi: the latter knew of the situation of the rest of the group who had embraced Christianity, and their reaction to the missionary's proposal of conversion was ambiguous in some cases,[42] unequivocal in others, but always with a negative outcome. The lack of leadership in the Christian Rishi *samaj* contrasted with powerful and effective leadership in the Hindu Rishi *samaj* which irritated and puzzled the missionary.[43] For the Hindu Rishi there was no point in converting to Christianity if they were going to find themselves in the same position as their brethren - abandoned by the missionary, still attached to their traditional Hindu practices,[44] divided among themselves and above all, still dependent on killing and eating cow. Perhaps, because of this the Rishi Christians represented the 'real poor' for the missionary,[45] and for this reason too he dedicated himself to them.

Dialogue was certainly at a standstill during this period, since the missionary had in mind the 'salvation of souls' negotiated through the 'salvation of the bodies', and even this could not always be achieved. The missionary was under the impression, and perhaps even the illusion, that the Rishi were going to understand his 'language of love', moving seamlessly from the material to the spiritual aspect of conversion. The Rishi, however, especially the Non-Christians, were pursuing the possibility of acquiring a respectable position in society, in antagonism or negotiation with the society that excluded them, by adopting those signs required by society to be recognised as *manus*. The missionary and Christian religion were there to be used in order to achieve this end. The attitude of the Kagmari *neta*, who eventually did not convert to Christianity, clearly illustrates this position:

> He says that he is willing to embrace the Catholic Religion, so that he will no longer be despised by the Hindus and treated like a dog simply because he is born Muchi. "I will not die a Muchi," he

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42 This was the case of the Rishi of Moshihati: "... We will see, will meet together and will decide" (*SIM.* 2:108).

43 The Sunanondi village was connected with other four villages: "We will hear about the result of the meeting-assembly of the 5 villages: Sunanondi, Ekhiala, Gorpara, Gatipara, Nijumpur" (*SIM.* 2:6; cf. *SIM.* 2:79/136).

44 The Christian leader of Jogodanandakati was "full of Hindu-pagan infiltrations..." (*SIM.* 2:19/74).

45 "... The words of Jesus become true: the Gospel must be preached to the poor! Our Christians are really the most poor, economically and spiritually! Poor Souls! What a moral misery!" (*SIM. 1*:126).

> said with emphasis almost imitating that Doctor of South India [Ambedkar], who invited all the Untouchables to find a new faith, and not to remain as at birth (*SIM.1*:127).

Those Rishi who remained Christians, especially the larger concentration in the mission centre of Simulia,[46] had certainly improved their standard of living and, as long as the missionary resided among them, their future was safeguarded. Here the small theocracy seemed to have functioned adequately with the people following the leaders, "in complete agreement with the Father" (*SIM.2*:47), when these had been re-established after Scuderi's visit. In the other villages, however, away from the vigilant presence of the missionary, it was easier for the Christians to escape the 'jealousy' of the Christian God, and 'religion' became once more a 'passport', in case of need.

Wider setting of dialogue

The need for good catechists to help the missionaries in their work, was a constant preoccupation throughout the whole period.[47] As had happened in the previous period, the missionaries preferred to recruit catechists from outside the Rishi community, such as Bhabarpara, Krishnagar and Faridpur, since "being educated in a more Christian environment, they would follow the Christian spirit" (*SIM.1*:106). The Simulia missionaries, however, had not always been lucky with their acquisitions, as in the case of a teacher who invited the Protestants to open a mission in Simulia, and a catechist who left the mission and returned to Baniarchok "leaving debts behind him" (*SIM.2*:35/126-7).

Together with the catechists residing in the village, Fr. Lazzaro launched the idea of the 'travelling catechist', to contact the 'apostates' and later the Non-Christian Rishi, when the movement started in Kaligonj and Bangoan (*SIM.2*:76). These catechists received a special monthly training on entering villages for evangelization:

> The best manner is to approach people in a way accepted by the Bengalis: sending two or three together with a musical instrument to sing religious songs, and later speaking with them about Religion, Jesus Christ, Redemption, sin, eternal punishment, the reward of Paradise, and the need to embrace the Christian religion to be saved (*SIM.2*:33).

Other methods of adapting the Christian message to the local culture were the productions in the form of *kirtan* (offered to the Christians but highly valued and followed by Hindus and Muslims), of

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46 In 1939 out of 675 Catholics, 400 were residing in Simulia (Sergi, *Aemulanimi*, 1939:85). This being the result of population movement from the outstations to Simulia.

47 The important innovation during this period was the opening in Jessore during 1937 of a training centre for catechists where young men were prepared through school teaching, exams and community life for the task of catechists in the various mission stations.

biblical stories adapted as a play.[48] Similarly, innovations were made in the reading of the Gospel in Bengali during mass, while the priest read it in Latin, especially during Holy Week, and reinstating pilgrimages which, well-guided, could become a "profitable religious act" (*SIM.2*:66). Help in this task came in the figure of Roti Pitor Sarkar, a Rishi catechist from Simulia who had visited all the Rishi villages with the PIME missionaries and later with the Salesians, especially during the time of apostasy (*SIM.1*:145), encouraging some to return (*SIM.2*:6). Apart from representing the continuity of dialogue between the missionaries and his people, once the PIME fathers had left, Pitor also exemplified, in his person, the possibility for the Rishi of finding their own way towards Christianity and certainly he embodied the highest level of dialogue so far reached between the Rishi and the one missionary who called him 'friend'.[49]

Among other groups interacting with the missionaries in Simulia were the local authorities and Governmental Officials. The missionaries generally asked them for help in particular circumstances of benefit to their Christians or other minority groups who turned to them for protection.[50] Fr. Lazzaro was critical of those Officials who, in his opinion, committed injustices "bringing grist to their own mill"[51] for reasons of 'communalism', especially when all the poor, whatever their religious creed, would have benefited.[52] He favoured instead a common effort as a solution for the situation of the rural people.[53]

The main attacks on Lazzaro, however, came from Muslims and Hindus when he tried to convert the Rishi, or simply to ameliorate their condition through education and social welfare. The cases of Noapara and Kaligonj exemplify the interference of powerful local interests in the dialogue between the missionary and the Rishi. The missionary understood that the rich and powerful were concerned more for their economic and material interests than for the 'conversion' of the Rishi to another religion. The struggle was, as Lazzaro realised, about "supremacy over the Muchi": in one way or other dialogue

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48 " It would be a good thing if these easy and simple dramas could be multiplied and staged with little expenditure in all the Christian villages. These people in fact love music and singing to a great extent, and even the Hindus and Muslims are greatly impressed by it" (*SIM.* 2:142).

49 When he died, on January 14th,1938, Fr. Lazzaro wrote about him: "... Such a great loss for the mission is the death of the only Muchi Catechist friend who knew the whole mission, the history of this mission and the circumstances that accompanied the conversion and apostasy of each and every village..." (*SIM.* 2: 68).

50 In 1937 Fr. Lazzaro interceded with the Sub-Divisional Officer for the Sikhari group (Hunters) of Gillapole: " The Police seem to have little trust in this group: they say that the Sikhari have been thieves for centuries, and are considered 'Tribesmen', and as such they must be constantly kept under surveillance" (*SIM.* 2:13).

51 The medical dispensary of Simulia served a population of Hindus, Muslims and Christians, and the Muslim Officer was favouring his community (*SIM.* 2:80).

52 After the flood of 1937 a Relief Centre was opened at Godkhali and closed a few months later because the people in need did not want to go to Jessore to work (*SIM.* 2:108).

53 " Every effort must be made to constitute a Committee for 'Rural Reconstruction' in the Simulia Union Board despite opposition by the more influential people in the villages of this Union Board, and by Caste struggle..." (*SIM.* 2:89).

with the Rishi would lead to the recognition that only a people with human dignity and self-respect could freely accept Christianity as a way of life.

The short period of twenty-five years spent by the Salesians with the Rishi displays the complexity of a troubled and multi-layered dialogue where individual aims had to come to terms with a wider and more complex social reality. When finally the Salesians were relieved from their work, some left hurriedly and those who remained were not eager to facilitate an easy introduction of the Xaverians to their new field. Apparently, even a 'a mission of salvation' becomes all too human when we are not the saviours.

3. The Jesuits among the Rishi 1918 - 1952: The Mission of Satkhira-Baradal (Calcutta Archdiocese)

Missionary activity among the Rishi in the Satkhira-Baradal southern area, between 1900-1952, was under the care of the Belgian Jesuits working in Calcutta Archdiocese. They had been present in India since the 16th century, and had an established missionary tradition.[1] Missionary activity among the Rishi[2] developed during two different periods: the first, between 1900c.-1930, reveals the missionary efforts to reach this extreme part of their field - reflecting Papal invitations to propagate the faith everywhere - which finally resulted in complete failure; the missionary in charge felt abandoned without the support of his superiors, who did not believe in this mission's success. In 1937, when a group of Baradal Rishi leaders invited the Jesuits to protect them from the Police and the Muslims, the mission was re-opened, this time ensuring success by continuity of presence.

The testimony left by the missionaries in their diaries indicates - perhaps surprisingly - the progress made by them in their effort to understand the Rishi mentality and way of life, replacing earlier preconceptions by a comprehension of the Rishis' reality. This attitude resulted from continuous re-assessment of the Jesuits' presence in Bengal as a mission territory,[3] disclosing a missionary debate concerned not only with conversions, but with open discussion and re-assessment of their methods. On the eve of Independence, they made a point of declaring that, though foreigners, "they love and admire the land of their adoption", and that their attitude towards India's culture and institutions was "one of respect and appreciation".[4] Though motivated by fear of expulsion, there can be no doubt of their sincerity if we consider the efforts made by the Jesuits to enhance dialogue, in a period when the rest of the Church was more preoccupied in propagating itself. As early as 1938, Fr. M. Ledrus,[5] commenting on the Papal missionary encyclicals *Maximum Illud* of Benedict XV (1919) and *Rerum Ecclesiae* of Pius XI (1926), reached conclusions which were innovative within the general climate of missionary methodology, but which were not new, since, as Ledrus pointed out, they were already

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1 The previous presence of Jesuits in Calcutta during 1834-1846, "had a short but eventful history". This mission entrusted to the Irish Jesuits, followed the decision of Rome to designate a Vicar Apostolic in the capital cities of British India. " It may be noted, incidentally, that the immediate concern was to serve the Roman Catholic population there: the conversion of non-Christians was a matter for the future" (Ballhatchet 1978:18-34).

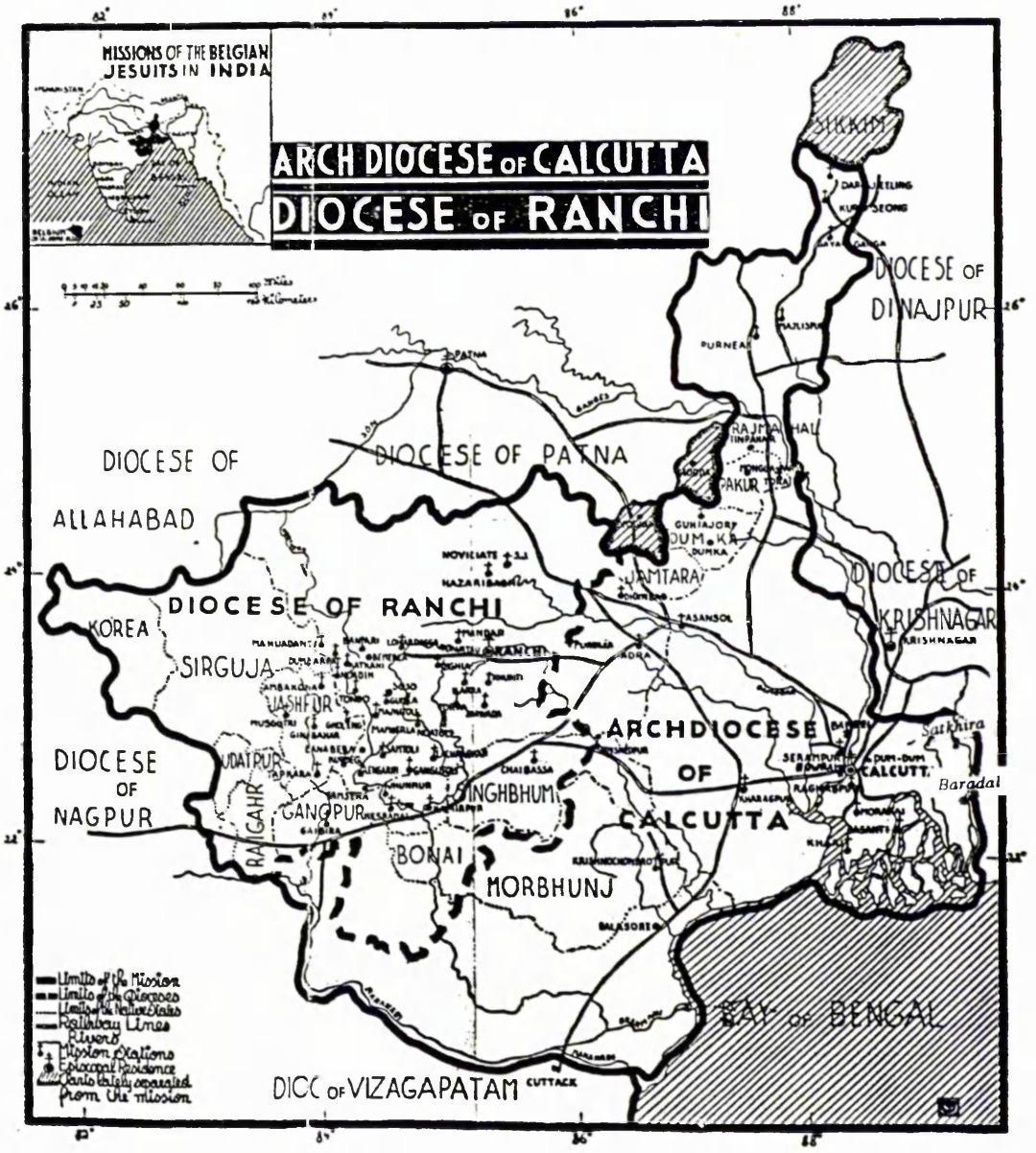
2 Apostolate among the natives had been launched in the Midnapore and Balassore Districts in 1865, in the 24 Parganas in 1868, and in Chota Nagpur in 1869; this last mission, mainly among the Oraons, the Munda and the Santali, developed so fast that from 1870 it absorbed the greater part of missionary activities, until it was established as the independent diocese of Ranchi in 1927 (see *Catholic Directory* - Archdiocese of Calcutta, 1970:4; Josson 1921/1:328-367).

3 The issues discussed during these years in the Jesuit internal magazine, *Our Field*, testify to this: 'Conversion vs. Consolidation' (*Our Field*, XIV/4, May, 1938: 172-177); the use of schools in propagating the faith (Ibid., XV/2, March, 1939: 34-40; XVI/5, May, 1940:109-112); mass literary movements (Ibid., XV/4, May, 1939:121-124); the use of Bengali names for the Christians (Ibid., XV/6, July, 1939:216-17; XV/7, August, 1939: 263-68); the Zamindari system and its abolition (Ibid., XXIII/4, July-August, 1947: 116-119; XXIV/2, March-April, 1948: 30-33).

4 *Our Field*, XXII/3, May-June 1946: 59-60.

5 Ledrus, M. 'The Mission Field in the Papal Directions', *Our Field*, XIV/3, March-April 1938: 85-98.

present in older documents of the Church: 'adaptation' was a concept largely discussed in the "Instruction of 1659 to the Vicar Apostolics" (see Marchocchi 1981). Ledrus' considerations go even further, attaining a position reached only by Vatican II: the Mission as '*Diakonia* ' or service to the people to whom one is sent.[6]



Mission of Satkhira-Baradal, South-East of the Calcutta Archdiocese (1918-1952).
(Source: Masson 1946)

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6 ".... There is no genuine missionary work, if this authentic spirit of the *exinanivit semetipsum* is not alive, if there is not the obstinate divine estimation and idealization of the people of the country and a holy trust in man and in grace. The responsibility in this matter is formidable, for the alternative is the '*rapinam arbitratus est*, the stifling of Faith and Church, a thinly veiled imperialistic colonization as had to be condemned already in the Council of Jerusalem - the first ecclesiastical condemnation....". Earlier, Ledrus underlined the importance of overcoming the missionaries' fear of being supplanted in the mission management by the local clergy, and the fear of co-operating with other missionary institutions ... "abandoning all spoils to start again elsewhere in renewed indigence" (Ledrus 1938: 98).

First Attempt at 'Conversions': 1918-1930

Missionary policy and Rishi response to Christianity

Though they began their work among the natives of Bengal in mid-1800, the Jesuits did not reach the Satkhira area till around 1900, at a time when the Papacy was urging the missionaries to evangelise every corner of 'their territory'.[7] This resulted in an impossible but courageous mission, which though following the directives of Rome was at variance with the local Archbishop, Mgr. Meulman, who did not believe in its success.

As happened in the northern area of Jessore, here too it was the Rishi alone who responded to the missionaries' advances. Despised by their Hindu *samaj*, oppressed by the Muslims and persecuted by the Police, they found refuge in the protecting presence of the foreign missionary. Rarely, if ever, did the Jesuits use the term 'conversion' and 'apostasy', to qualify the Rishis' position towards Christianity, preferring less compromising expressions, such as 'came over', 'joined', 'gave their name', 'fell off', 'returned to their *jat*', 'refused to see us'. The realisation that the Rishi were not 'converted' by virtue of adhering to Christianity was reached by the missionaries through a patient encounter with their daily reality of segregation and suffering. Strangely enough, the Jesuits never seemed to question why the Rishi were the only ones willing to accept Christianity. Their age-long experience in India had taught them that the poor were always, for whatever reason, the first to 'sign up'. Past events in the Chota Nagpur Mission among the Tribals had sparked a line of action in Satkhira, which led them to realise that for the poor 'Religion' meant struggle, and 'Salvation' meant a means of obtaining justice.

This position was not always unambiguous, especially when the missionary bartered protection in exchange for faithfulness.[8] The idea of 'God's punishment' for unfaithfulness had always been a temptation for the unsuccessful preacher and in this the missionaries of Satkhira were no different (*SAT.1*:43-4). In some cases the missionary's reaction to unsteadiness is one of understanding and acceptance, especially noticeable when the Rishi refused to divulge their real reasons for 'apostasy': marriage alliances, material gain (*SAT.1*:12/45) and power struggles. At other times not only did the missionaries apply Hindu-Rishi methods of fining those who re-joined the 'Muchi' *samaj*, but in fact extended this practice to prevent them leaving the Christian *samaj* (*SAT.1*:13/56). Thus following the Rishi mentality, it seems that the missionaries had decided to 'negotiate' aggregation to Christianity, exchanging what the Rishi most valued: money.

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7 This 'mission theology' does not seem to appear as such in the diaries: the missionaries reported on their apostolic work without justifying any particular position or implying that they were out "to save souls".

8 "As soon as we were away the police got hold of them and it was as if they were caught for being unfaithful to their faith. In reality it was so, for the police would not have taken them if I had taken them under my protection...." (Katallolla, March-April 1919, *SAT.1*:13).

The missionary was fully conscious that the only way to establish dialogue with the Rishi, at least at the initial stage, was by making them aware of the alternative they would face as 'Muchi' rather than Christians. These two terms are used in constant opposition in the diaries specifying belonging to one group or the other. The Rishi were torn between these two poles: they clearly saw the advantage of accepting Christianity but they were reluctant to renounce their 'old tradition', even though this meant 'untouchability'. To be full members of the Hindu *Samaj* had always been their aspiration and as soon as someone promised *sangathan* they were ready to undertake all the *suddhi* needed to cleanse them. Some of the Rishi were "particularly active against the mission, preaching cleanliness and Hinduism" (*SAT.*2:6-7/9). However, others felt that they could earn a living from their 'vile job' as skinners and were ready to switch to Christianity. In a way, Christianity represented an alternative for those Rishi who were not ready, for the sake of being recognised 'pure' Hindus, to renounce their profitable trade as skinners. Failing to be accepted into the Hindu *samaj*, these Rishi turned to Christianity where, in addiction to protection, they expected some fulfilment of their humanity, be it simply by way of possessing a *pukur*, a chapel, or a school.

This 'contractual exchange', which came to an end on March 1930, had already suffered a crisis earlier in 1925, with the implementation of the Sarda Act.[9] Fr. Dontaine, reflecting later upon these events, revealed that the lack of good catechists, the leaders' encouragement towards *suddhi* movements and the implementation of the Sarda Act itself were responsible for the final collapse of the mission.[10] Like Fr. Wauters, who in 1925 had accused, not the Rishi for abandoning the mission, but the Bishop for not sending 'a man on the spot', Fr. Dontaine, perhaps out of respect for Hindu tradition, blamed the prevailing situation more than the Rishi themselves.

One traditional practice common among the Rishi which Fr. Dontaine did, however, condemn was cattle poisoning, and in such instances the Police were contacted for information.[11] This was a way of distinguishing those who genuinely accepted Christianity from those who wanted protection following an alleged 'crime'.[12] Nevertheless, such 'collaboration' with the Police placed the missionary in a most ambiguous role, vis-à-vis the Rishi, as for instance when the Police Inspector of Paikgaccha

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9 The Sarda Act, meant to raise the marriageable age for girls, came in force from 1st April 1930. ".... They want to settle their marriages before the act comes into force!! The catechist tours in March and reports that all have left to marry the babies in the Hindoo way" (*SAT.* 2:30).

10 "... For the final collapse in 1930, the Sarda act is responsible. There was a panic among the people, and they imagined that it would be a calamity not to give in marriage all the children (babies one month old included) before the act came into force [1st April 1930]. They gave them in marriage in the Hindoo way, and all left the mission in March 1930" (*SAT.* 2:32-33).

11 "... I have always kept into touch with the police to know whether in any village they called for us there were any bad characters ('*Dagi*' or Criminal Tribe Act people). I found their indications very precious" (*SAT.* 2:33).

12 15-10-1927, Kamarali: "the *Chaukidar* comes and asks me if we shall protect them ...they become Christians. On enquiring I learn he is suspected of stealing goats and poisoning cattle" (*SAT.*2:14).

approved of the missionary 'working among the Rishi'.[13] It was not uncommon for the Police to utilise a missionary presence in order to control certain groups, the most notorious case being that of the Salvation Army involved in the formation and supervision of settlements where the 'Criminal Tribes'[14] were to be re-educated, supposedly by way of Christian ethics. Many Rishi, especially in the Southern area of Baradal, were involved in 'illegal activities' and all of them colluded in covering up a business which had permitted them to survive in hard times. Their trade as bone collectors put them under suspicion and their status was comparable to the 'wandering tribes', which was only a step away from being registered as a 'criminal tribe'. When a group was classified as such, everyone in the group, even the innocent, had to suffer the many restrictions that were thereafter applied. The view taken was that "a criminal is so from the beginning and will be so to the end; reform is impossible for it is his trade, his caste.... almost his religion to commit crime."[15]

In a second and more successful attempt at dialogue with the Rishi, the missionaries did in fact come to 'understand', though not to condone, their 'criminal' attitude and its origin. The encounter which had scarcely begun during this first period before it was interrupted, in the second phase was restored by the Baradal Rishi who turned to the missionaries for protection.

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13 "The Police Inspector of Paikgaccha says the muchis are going to be registered as Criminal Tribes. He would be happy if we can work among them" (*SAT.* 2:4).

14 The Criminal Tribes Act was promulgated in 1871 and amended later several times, the last one being in 1924. "[The Criminal Tribes Act]...placed certain communities under strict supervision and restricted their free movement. However, the fact of being branded under the designation 'Criminal Tribe' had often tragical consequences for a whole community ..... For all members of these criminal tribes were indiscriminately placed at the mercy of often unsympathetic and corrupt officials" (Fuchs 1977a:123).

15 Raghaviah, V., *The Problem of Criminal Tribes*, quoted in Radhakrishna 1989:274.

Second attempt: the Jesuits in Baradal (1930) and Fr. H. Koster among the Rishi (1939-1954)

Missionary perception of the Rishi and missionary methodology

Frs. Demsar and Dontaine, the first two missionaries to approach the Baradal Rishi in answer to their plea, had a clear understanding of the situation: the Rishi 'crushed by fear' wanted their protection, although 'the religious element' did not interest them at all. For the missionary this no doubt held a future hope, but at this stage he had accepted the 'nominal' adherence of some Rishi who received baptism only after an adequate period of catechumenate.[16] Once the missionaries had helped the Rishi in their court cases, their priority became establishing village schools in the hope that education would serve the double purpose of 'civilising' the Rishi and helping them to understand the Christian message.[17] Eventually it would also favour Rishi interaction with society, but at this stage finding a teacher "ready to live with those low people who feed on carrion" (*SAT.1*:66), proved difficult. Fr. Dontaine, who had made his first appearance among the Rishi 12 years earlier, understood their 'Untouchability' which made them an easy target for other groups.[18]

Fr. Mesaric, as well as granting protection to the Rishi, was also preoccupied with their 'spiritual' formation and their participation in religious activities: though pleased when the children knew their prayers, he was dissatisfied with their lack of devotion (*SAT.2*:51). The real problem, however, lay with the adults, who not only avoided religious participation,[19] but were still involved in gambling, stealing and cattle-poisoning (*SAT.2*:82/105). The root of all this, according to Fr. Mesaric, was the Rishis' lack of drive: "..... As long as this people do not love work they will remain thieves....". Occasionally, Fr. Mesaric urged those who wanted to become Christians to give up skinning since this constituted the '*occasio proxima*' for their activity as cattle poisoners (*SAT.2*:88/123). At other times he forbade them to take part in the *puja* as musicians, thus reducing their prospects of working still further (*SAT.2*:124-5). Mesaric was also struck by the low position of women in the Rishi *samaj* and

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16 Some years later in fact, when Fr. Koster took charge of the mission, he speaks about the presence of 'catechumens', not of baptised Christians. This means that the Jesuits had foreseen a long period of preparation before giving baptism to the Rishi.

17 "Baradal: Thirty boys and girls are in the school, many know their prayers. They seem more civilized after three weeks of schooling" (*SAT.1*:66).

18 " Their trade puts them among the 'Untouchables'. They have the monopoly of the dead cow. The skin is theirs..... After that they gather up the bones. Sometimes they go out on the rivers collecting bones; and seem to ply a not inconsiderable trade with the mills of Calcutta... One could see with half an eye why they were 'Untouchable'; for while skinning the carcasses of dead cows, very few of those poor hungry devils could resist the temptation of slicing off and bringing home some 'choice bits' which they dry in the sun... Nowadays there seems to have come a wave of reform; officially they no longer eat carrion; but on the sly, who can say how many resist the temptation?" (*Our Field* January 1938, XIV/1:15-16).

19 *SAT.2*:74. " My first mass at Baradal... It will be a hard task to make them come to the church... The children are always ready... " (Ibid:52).

the early age at which they were given in marriage.[20] He tried to accommodate the Rishi tradition to the Church by allowing the celebration of the *panpattro* as an engagement, provided the guardians signed an undertaking not to permit the engaged couple to live together until the marriage proper had been celebrated (*SAT.2*:82-3).

The six schools, run by twelve masters, which were scattered in the northern and southern mission territory, were considered as 'real, positive work', and a priority to be maintained in spite of its cost.[21] To defend the importance of education, Mesaric often argued with parents and *matabbars* when the schools were neglected (*SAT.2*:133): the old people of Baradal still remember his rows in the village as he searched for truants.[22] The real difficulty was finding proper teachers for the Rishi, since outsiders were either home sick (*SAT.2*:103) or were not willing to stay among a *nongra jat* (dirty *jat*).[23] Fr. Mesaric was even prepared to keep a Muslim teacher already assigned by Fr. Dontaine (*SAT.2*:50). These efforts soon paid off and a small group of bright Rishi boys and girls were sent to the nearby mission of Basanti (West Bengal) to continue their studies (*SAT.2*:146). The education policy of these first missionaries was never to be abandoned; on the contrary, it has been intensified and in some cases pursued as the only valuable means of helping the Rishi in their struggle for full humanity, and although education at the outset was 'used' for evangelical purposes, creating an unbalanced dialogue, it was later utilised by the Rishi to interact with the missionary and the rest of society.

Fr. Koster's first impression of the Rishi on taking over from Fr. Mesaric was not favourable: "People here have not yet learned what gratitude is" (*SAT.3*:5). This was to change following his permanent presence among the Rishi, since "it takes years to understand the mind of these Muchis ... yet, to become Muchis with the Muchis is very difficult".[24] He soon understood and accepted that "they did not become Christians for the sake of religion. All they wanted was protection, and protection they got, as the Police left them in peace".[25] He also realised that the "Rishis' mentality (was) formed by the powerful influence of ages, having been left alone, having been forced to eke out an existence which does not allow them to become prosperous unless they do away with the Seventh

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20 14-3-38 " Holy Mass in Baradal. This time a good crowd of people came even womenfolk. They call them '*magi* ' instead of '*meye*' or '*stri* '. I explained [to] them the meaning of *magi* [prostitute], and told them never more to use this word for their own wives" (*SAT.*2:60).

21 *Our Field*, Jan.-Feb. 1939, XV/1:2-5.
24-2-38 "Keargati: .... discussion after mass about the plot of land for school and chapel" (*SAT.* 2:53; Cf. *SAT.* 2:110/145).

22 "... The whole day inspecting the work of the master in the school. In the afternoon I went around in the village [Baradal] with the stick to catch the children who remained playing at home instead of going to school" (*SAT.* 2:96).

23 "Sriula: Thomas Asi (catechist) left without telling the Father, because: '*ami ei nongra jater bhat khete pari na*' [I am not willing to eat my rice with this dirty *jat*]" (*Sat.* 2:63).

24 *Our Field*, Dec. 1941, XVII/8:154-155.

25 *Our Field*, Nov.-Dec. 1942, XVIII/10:206.

Commandment".[26] They could not, as he put it, "shake off so soon thousands of years of cunning necessitated by their struggle for existence among, or better alongside, the Hindu fold".[27]

Though eager to change the mentality of his "obstinate and criminal children", Koster soon came to terms with the concrete reality of living among the Rishi and the need for perseverance: [28] "this caste is too fickle for quick results.... but we in the field often get impatient because it goes so very, very slowly".[29] Consequently, he concentrated his efforts on the consolidation of his community as opposed to increasing it numerically.[30] This approach was based on his perception that "the Muchi caste does not hang together..... and yet their mentality and customs are identical."[31] However, he was convinced that "every missionary has to calculate his own chances [make his own choices], as circumstances vary from place to place, from village to village".[32]

Koster was very conscious of developments in the mission: from the initial stage of granting protection, another stage followed, where adherence was conditioned by certain rules and codes, considered imperative in order to be accepted into the Christian fold but always negotiated with difficulty.[33] From his inside knowledge of the Rishi *samaj* the missionary found good reason to impose his code of conduct:[34]

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26 Ibid.:207.

27 *Our Field*, Jan.-Feb. 1945, XXI/1:6.

28 "Those who work among the Low Castes know that it takes a very long time to change their mentality, which is a special one not easily understood" (*Our Field*, April 1942, XVIII/3:49).

29 *Our Field*, July-Aug., 1944, XX/4:123.

30 " Past experience has made us prudent, and unless and until those that are Christians have become more stable and reliable, unless and until the boys and the girls taught in our schools will have grown up and are able to stand in their own legs [on their own feet], it is useless to make special efforts to increase the number of Catholics without reasonable prospects of keeping them. . . . . Our chief work now is to improve those we have, to work on the mentality of the children, our only hope" (*Our Field*, Nov.-Dec. 1942, XVIII/10:206-7).

31 Ibid.:206.

32 Ibid.

33 " There is village A, which came over in its entirety some four years ago. Of course the village was supposed to be an immaculate one, all good people. Stealing or poisoning activities? Never heard of them! ..... Only when the catechist gets the details of the happenings in the village by staying day and night, is he able to get an insight. In the beginning they flock together in the chapel, the school is well frequented, everything goes wonderfully well. Any trouble that arises is due to the injustice of outsiders, who are now pouncing on our poor flock - a kind of religious persecution! It takes some years to fanthom the depth of their minds, the crookedness of their calculations. ..... Nowadays we are more careful. Just now some of the estranged villages want to come back, for they are in trouble with the Police! After the job is done, they lustily continue their criminal trade and one has to start all over again. The policy we now adopt is to allow them to call themselves Christians. They may marry their sons and daughters among our people. They may also send their sons to our boarding-schools....." (*Our Field*, Jan.-Feb. 1945, XXI/1:6-7).

34 Earlier Koster had realised that "it is only after a long time that the catechists staying among them [the Rishi] get a real glimpse of what is going on around them". So he adopted the policy of leaving a catechist in the same place for as long as possible. Even the missionary "who travels about can put two and two together with the intimate knowledge he receives from all quarters." This 'knowledge' of the facts was used by Koster to remind the Rishi of their obligations as Christians.

> .... when the priest started to be hard on them, a number of the most notorious turned Muchi again. Two parties, one Muchi the other Christian, now combat each other, both parties calculating their own interests. However, this does not prevent them from making useful combinations if circumstances require it.[35]

At the same time Koster was tolerant towards those who needed to call themselves Christians for protection's sake,[36] and did not prevent them from doing so, producing thus a shift in the understanding of conversion towards a more open concept.[37] Indeed, his goal and that of his catechists was of being "a Muchi among the Muchis". Many years later, and with a more elaborate theological grounding, his ideals were to become in the Vatican Council the 'theology of incarnation-adaptation-acculturation'.

'Muchi mentality' versus 'Christian mentality'

The general expression, 'Muchi mentality', often used in the diaries by Koster, indicates his perception of the Rishis' shortcomings: every time the Rishi resisted the missionary's plans, or insisted upon following their 'old ways' (cattle poisoning, dacoity, stealing, adultery, eating rotten meat, gambling, drunkenness) it was due to this 'impenetrable mentality' which could be grasped only after years of residing among them. However, aware that this mentality resulted from centuries of segregation and oppression, Koster directed all his activity "....to giving them courage and self-confidence"(*SAT.3*:79).

At times Koster's patience was tried by the Rishis' attitude (*SAT.3*:11/104): he criticised their inferiority complex[38] and their arrogance (*SAT.6*:39), and even became bitter towards them, especially when they used 'to play tricks'[39] on him, when, after being helped in Court Cases, they left him 'in the lurch' (*SAT. 6*:9), or when his sense of justice was outraged:

> Bardal... No Muchi Christian will listen to the priest. *Doya*, [mercy/ forgiveness], *doya, doya*,..... always *doya* and no justice! (*SAT. 3*:148).

It is at village level that the complexity of this dialogue assumes its true character. The Sriula village (South-West of Baradal), already contacted by Fr. Dontaine, "made an excellent impression"

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35 *Our Field*, Nov.-Dec. 1942, XVIII/10:206.

36 " The best elements among these entirely new Christians without tradition have been baptised, the rest being tackled as circumstances allow" [meaning that they would be allowed to call themselves Christians] (*Our Field*, May-June 1943, XIX/3:61).

37 "The Christian religion is still too much for many, and it requires all our wits to keep them within bounds" (*Our Field*, Jan.-Feb. 1945, XXI/1:8).

38 " Schools Sub-inspector inspects School. Boys don't reply as they could. Always the same inferiority complex. They lose their heads as soon as there comes an outsider...." (*SAT. 6*:46).

39 " Bardal.....Cases of drunkenness are examined by *bichar*. Destroy the papers signed by the Christians that they will not drink any more, nor gamble, nor fornicate! No use!" (*SAT. 3*:138-9).

(*SAT. 2*:50) on Fr. Mesaric, and Fr. Koster defined it as "the best [most] promising centre" of the entire mission. When "the crop was ripe [and] all were well-disposed", thirty people received baptism. Meanwhile, the Police were after them "alleging thefts and dacoities" and though Fr. Koster recognised that the people were not guilty of all the accusations, he was convinced that they were "doing secret work". When the local *Daroga* urged the *matabbars* "to inform him of their whereabouts, they were also told that .... they will be put on the Criminal Tribes List" (*SAT. 3*: 9/53/68). Fr. Koster, having questioned the Superintendent of Police, "who still thinks we protect thieves", exposed the responsible leaders[40] and challenged them,[41] but his decision to close Sriula mission, since they were "a den of robbers who do not want to improve [and] collude again with the Muslims", was later reconsidered (*SAT. 3*:109/114/121). With the leaders revealing their intention to 'be Muchi', and threatening the elders who wanted to receive communion, Koster questioned "the future of these baptised robbers [who] threatened the catechist with murder if he gave away their secrets....". Eventually the village was abandoned, despite the many requests to return there.[42]

Additional details regarding the internal structure of the Rishi group, the role of the leaders and the influence of village politics, will clarify the Rishis' attitude towards Christianity. While the 'Muchi' were using traditional signs to express the group's solidarity, the Christians were replacing these with new signs, such as church-school buildings, regular celebration of sacraments, religious instruction and, above all, a change of mentality, so emphasised by the missionary. This, however, was as difficult for the Rishi as acceptance of external improvements had been easy, and the difficulty became most evident when the Rishi manifested the group's solidarity through marriage alliances and *sradda* ceremonies.

Following an almost standard pattern, some families would approach the missionary making their requests,[43] and others, seeing advantages, followed them (*SAT. 3*:47). The missionary knew full well that they only needed help and protection[44] but he always "desired this big village" and hoped to

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40 "... Consequently I disclosed to the C.I.D. Inspector some recent dacoities by our Sriula people. I asked him to take only the leaders to task..." (*SAT. 3*:85).

41 "Sriula: told the people there frankly that I know them to be dacoits and thieves naming Nilmani as the leader. The Police insist on making known their movements and I told them that they had to comply with this wish...." (*SAT. 3*:103-4). The " Sreeulla [Sriula] Muchi's gang" was well known to the Police. The gang was composed of 45 members residing in Paikgacha, Asasuni, Kaligonj, Satkhira and Dacope Thanas. Their 'criminality' had been established since 1914 and various members had been sentenced to rigorous imprisonment: " As the ordinary preventive measures failed to check their criminality, the gang was brought under the operation of the Criminal Tribes Act in the year 1928 and 19 members were registered.... In the year 1939 the gang was struck off the register as it was considered inactive. In the year 1940 the gang has been re-instated in the register as the gang was found to be active..." (Government of Bengal- Bengal Police, *List of Active Dacoit Gangs In Bengal, 1940*, Bengal Government Press, 1942).

42 " People both of Keargati and Sriula annoy me with their repeated petitions to look after them again. Keargati people are troubled by the police at night owing to dacoities" (*SAT. 3*:169; cf. *SAT. 4*:24).

43 8-1-1940. "Senergati: 18 families applied. Big village of 500 souls or more. They want tubewell and the rest" (*SAT. 3*:15).

44 " Senergati.... They are humbled by Hindus and decided to take the final jump..." (Ibid.).

"change their mentality". Aware that "they did not understand the value of religion",[45] Koster decided "to rent a house rather than buy ground" for the moment, as the mind of the people proved unsettled and "still steeped in superstitions" (*SAT. 3*:90; *SAT.4*:79). So it was that the missionary commanded the destruction of a *puja ghar* (*SAT. 3*:183), prevented the Brahmin entering a Christian *para* to celebrate *sraddha* and placed the statue of the Virgin in a *puja* tree![46]

A new village, in Koster's view, was like a "melting pot, a great problem", where the movement to and from Christianity constituted "the usual battle". When the old 'Muchi mentality' surfaced, the first Rishi demand was a change of catechist, considered the *longa manus* of the missionary.[47] While some remained in order to receive material help,[48] others, forced into the open, preferred to "revert to being Muchi", and through *sraddha* ceremonies sought to win back the others.[49] Indeed, an empty stomach was reason enough for the poor to be tempted back to old practices.

Koster attempted to replace *sraddha*, which involved great expense,[50] with a Requiem Mass,[51] but he insisted on making the Rishi pay the full cost, although acknowledging that "it was very difficult to make Muchis contribute anything towards religion". On the other hand, they were prepared to ruin themselves in order to maintain their old ceremonies: firstly, since they were accustomed to receiving from, and not giving to the missionary and, secondly, since the old tradition united them as a group. Ironically, *sraddha* and the sharing of a meal were much closer to the original Christian celebration of Mass. The new sign (Requiem Mass), which reached them overlaid by theological discussion, must have had very little significance for the Rishi, and it took "persuasion and threats to drive them to church" (*SAT. 3*:168). For the Rishi, as a threatened minority, *sraddha* signified solidarity and a sense of belonging, and adherence to Christianity did not stop them "returning to the group". The explanation given by the Rishi for this, even today, is exemplified by the idiom '*rakter than*' (the strength of blood), which concretely symbolises what Koster called 'Muchi mentality'. It was the *matabbars* who

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45 " [The] children [are] willing and keen. The rest is as it always is in a new Muchi conquest..." (*SAT. 3*:67).

46 *SAT. 3*:188. The missionaries had accepted *sraddha* ceremonies in the past as inevitable: "15-1-1938. Dhangora..... People will come back: are held back for a few days because of the *sraddha* of an old woman...." (*SAT. 1*:43).

47 " They want me to change my catechist!! It is always the same. When the fire comes too close our criminal brethren want to remove those who observe and check them" (*SAT. 4*:7).

48 "Meanwhile those who remained Christians keep firm especially on account of the material help we render them...." (*SAT. 4*:9).

49 *Our Field*, April 1942, XVIII/3:49.

50 " When *sraddha* is performed, the children of the deceased are supposed to sell the movable property of the parents. If there is no property, loans have to be taken; and this is the cause of much misery. We are trying now to change this custom" (Ibid.).

51 This was called *kalo misa* (black mass), from the colour of the priest's vestments.

championed the cause of the '*rakter than*', in particular those who came to realise that the missionary power was increasing at the expense of their own authority.

Matabbars and village 'politics'

The attitude of the *matabbars* towards Christianity varied according to the power struggles within the Rishi Christian *samaj* as alignments of different *gusthi* changed the balance between different *dals* or parties (*SAT. 5*:45). Problems within these *dals* started when some Christian *matabbars* wanted, for whatever reason, to keep or re-establish relationships with the Hindu Rishi *samaj*, which represented for the missionary their old 'Muchi mentality'. This issue becomes particularly relevant where marriage alliances are concerned.

Koster, a businessman before becoming a missionary, was well aware of the presence of these forces within his community and dealing with the "power politics of the *matabbars*" became a major task for him.[52] For Rishi in the Hindu *samaj*, it was the *matabbars* who made all decisions in community issues, even those related to religion and ethics, and especially to marriage. In a Christian Rishi community everything was initially done under the control and with the approval of the *matabbars*, but after some years, these leaders started losing their decision-making power to the missionary and the catechists, particularly in moral matters.

Though initially it was evident that 'the religious element' was not a deciding factor in the Rishis' conversion, the missionaries had not linked the divisions within the Rishi *samaj* to the problem of 'conversion', and only after years of presence among them, did Koster understand that the *matabbars* had the power to admit into, or to dismiss from the Christian *samaj* a given *gusthi*. This had become a well-defended privilege and was constantly negotiated with the rest of the Rishi *samaj*.[53] In view of this, the missionary was eager to accept new *gusthi* into the community to reduce the power for the "the wicked old Christian chiefs" (*SAT. 4*:5).

The *matabbars*' position became apparent to Fr. Demsar when they opposed somebody who wanted to become Christian:

> *Matabbars*..... want to be asked for permission if somebody, not of our fold, is to be baptised. It is the old trick: if somebody wants to become Christian, he has first to feed '*samaj* ' that means

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52 "Power politics is indulged in by all shades of castes and sects ..... Every missionary has to take this power politics into account. The wise missionary will slowly come to know how to curb the evil influence of most of the traditional *matabbars* (leaders or chiefs), but he will not gain this knowledge without tough fights and disappointments. Often the existence of the new mission depends on a correct understanding of how to deal with these *matabbars*" (*Our Field*, May-June 1946, XXII/3:63).

53 "*Matabbars*, especially Odhor, want to be asked for permission if somebody, not of our fold is to be baptised...." (Fr. Demsar in Dhandia, *SAT. 5*:39).

> *matabbars*! They cannot grasp the difference between religion as such, and Christian village *samaj* (*SAT. 5*:39).

The privilege of a *bara khana* (big meal) was certainly highly valued by the Rishi Christian leaders. Fr. Demsar, however, fails to acknowledge the importance and advantages of a symbolic event which gave the leaders a special place within the community. Indeed, the omission of a *bara khana* signalled loss of authority and privileges. This authority involved certain duties and obligations, including the overseeing of burials, but, when deprived of their privileges, the *matabbars* negotiated the accomplishment of duties. When asked to 'exercise their authority as a service to the community', the newly-converted Rishi leaders felt "the new yoke too heavy for them". For the missionary, the solution was to promote a '*Jubakerdal* ' (association of young men) "animated by spirit of sacrifice, doing the work not afraid of losing a *bara khana*". But this battle was lost almost before it began, for "as long as such *matabbars* are not dead, the young men cannot and dare not do anything.... for the improvement of the village spirit" (*SAT. 5*:64).

The *matabbars*' status came under further threat with the problem of '*dharma dusi* ' (sinful people) in the Christian *samaj* when someone was excommunicated by the missionary; in the past it had always been the *matabbars* who decided expulsion and re-admission to the *samaj*. Furthermore, the missionary reinforced the laws concerning excommunication by compelling "the leaders to sign a paper in which they confirm that no *Somaj* [*matabbar*] is able to undo *dharma dos* [religious fault] " (*SAT. 5*:2). Often the excommunicated were well-to-do, and naturally the leaders were keen to preserve the connection, but the missionary, eager to fight 'the Muchi mentality', insisted on the principle (*SAT. 6*:19) that a *dharma dusi* was to be considered such both to religion and *samaj*.[54] Just as the Rishi identified *samaj* with the authority of the *matabbars*, 'religion' was identified with the authority of the missionary (*SAT. 5*:9). This was seen by Koster as a "clash between ecclesiastical power and that exercised by *Somaj* ....", with some *matabbars* showing their influence and power by inviting the excommunicated to their feasts, and were even "shameless enough to invite the priest".[55] Koster, nevertheless, continued his losing battle, and "... henceforth *dusi* will have to sit at the back of the church as a sign of their guilt....".[56]

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54 "..... They will not accept the fact that excommunication by the Church means also excommunication by the *samaj*, and so we are again at loggerheads" (*Our Field*, May-June 1950. XXVI/3:83).

55 " Excommunicated people are often the most dangerous and boisterous people, desirable by group leaders who are bent on an increase of their numbers, i.e., influence and power. The difficulty arises when there is a feast and when people have to be invited. They will not leave out the excommunicated men, that is they want to show the other group that they can afford it their own way [getting away with it]. They are shameless enough to invite the priest, which invitation has to be refused, also the catechist cannot accept, and then they will naturally accuse him of being a one-party man . . . " (*Our Field*, May-June 1950, XXVI/3:83).

56 "... How to punish people efficaciously [effectively] if the church condemns and re-accepts without permission of the *Samaj*? Of course the real question is that the people are not united, that the leaders are corrupt, that the small fry have no power for good..." (*SAT. 6*:73).

It seems that history repeated itself in this little corner of Bengal; such clashes were not new in the history of the Church and, even though on a minor scale, the result here was the same. Even the methods used resemble those of Church and State in Europe (*cuius regio eius religio*): excommunication, change of religion, domination of certain groups over others, alliances with external powers. The big difference in our case is that the missionary in this country was not an absolute authority, nor could he claim undisputed access to authority as coming from God, and the Christian Rishi, in their turn, did not occupy a high rank in society. This environment and the humble situation of both the missionary and the Rishi favoured in many ways new possibilities for dialogue, which had started as a confrontation but was to continue with some degree of mutual understanding. In the Satkhira Mission during this period, despite the deficiencies on both sides, the Rishi and the missionary discovered that they needed each other to survive, to affirm themselves in a wider society and indeed, perhaps to be themselves.

The wider setting of Dialogue

Other groups in society often intervened in the Rishi-missionary encounter. While the Mahasobha were active against the mission for religious and political reasons,[57] other caste Hindus favoured the re-conversion of the Rishi mainly to safeguard their political and economic interests.[58] When, after Independence, some caste Hindus spread rumours that "the Christians had to become Hindus",[59] Koster explained their attitude as "one of jealousy and communalism". Later, this situation was resolved by the course of events: "the better class Hindus [were] leaving [East Pakistan] quietly as they do not feel

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57 "As to the North of the district, the Hindu *Mahasobha* is trying feverishly to reconvert the Christians to Muchidom....." (*Our Field,* April 1940, XVI/4:88).
"... Received news from his grace that the Hindu *Mahasobha* made a complaint about the conduct of the Christian missionaries, especially mentioning the case of Baini, Dhandia" (*SAT. 3*:69/93).
"Senergati people also are returning. It is only their misery that brings them back. The Hindu Mahasobha closed the school and left the *mandir* with... hurrahs of joy" (*SAT. 3*:103).

58 " Suddhi Gan, the zamindari's cousin comes every day (to Goalchator), to spoil their mind forcing them to become Hindu again" (*SAT. 3*:27).

59 The catechists were confused about the meaning of Pakistan and Hindustan, because the Hindus, "..... told our Christians that the 'Saheb' had to quit and the Christians had to become Hindu. In a precarious mission and fickle people like ours it may be a blessing to be in Pakistan. We experience no trouble with the Muslims who, after all, have won here" (*SAT. 4*:132-133).

at ease".[60] The Hindu Rishi, often through the Mahasobha,[61] tried to win back the Christian Rishi, who maintained their relationship with the former through common trade, alliances and marriages. At other times, the antagonism between different Christian *dals*,[62] frequently fomented by the Muslims (*SAT. 5*:53), or simply due to disagreements with the missionary or catechists,[63] were responsible for Christian defections.

Some Muslims supported the missionary,[64] but he was opposed by the shopkeepers, who gave work to the Rishi as coolies, and the moneylenders, who financed the Rishi in their skin and bone trade. This all ceased once the Rishi were given protection by the missionary. But Koster had to tread carefully, since going against the 'Muslim enemies' endangered the position of his flock. He was, however, eager to collaborate with friendly Muslims and in association with Muslim League representatives he fought against the 'Hindu Marwari'.[65] He was elected president of the 'U.P. Bardal School' by Muslims and Hindus and he accepted for reasons of "good co-operation with other religions" (*SAT. 3*:78-79). Given the particular character of this mission, the missionary felt compelled to achieve a special understanding with Police and Government Officials (*SAT. 3*:7/54; *SAT. 6*:80-81). On the other hand, he fought against police corruption and brutality,[66] an issue increasingly relevant after Independence.[67] Towards officials, Koster reacted with tact and diplomacy, since they could be of

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60 *SAT. 6*:26. The exodus of the Hindus continued and reached its peak in connection with passport regulation issued by India and Pakistan: " The exodus of Hindus in connection with passport regulations is in full swing. Many go because they made up their minds long ago. Others leave on account of [the] dwindling of community strength. Again others go out of misconceived fear. Both Pakistan and India will feel the consequences" (*SAT. 6*:81). Previously, Fr. Koster had participated in meetings organized by the Peace Committee and was instructed to restore the "shaken confidence" of the Hindus in his area. " Senergati: Fr. Koster..... In the evening there was a meeting of Hindus and the Muslim President. Although there has never been any trouble there, Hindus are panicking. Hope we gave them some courage..." (*SAT. 5*:86).

61 In 1937-39 many court cases were started against the Rishi Christians and the mission in Baradal by the representatives of the *Mahasobha* (*Our Field*, April 1940, XVI/4:87).

62 " Senergati: Some have turned Muchi again following the refusal of Christians to perform *Puja* for recovery of a sick child. Real reason is probably animosity between different *dals*" (*SAT. 3*:133).

63 " Senergati: fine for gambling . . . Kalibor [one of the *Matabbars*] and sons plus majority of people become Muchi again: *Hari-Tari* still rings...." (*SAT. 4*:7).
"Bardal: There are rumours that Kanai [*Matabbar*] may become Muchi (marriage matters).... " (*SAT. 5*:42).

64 *Our Field*, Jan.-Feb. 1939, XV/1:3.

65 " Bardal: The manager of Peeru Saheb invites us to be present on 19th Nov. at the meeting of the Muslim League. I allow our people [to] go as we need the friendship of Mohammedans at present to offset the Marwari danger" (*SAT. 3*:75).

66 *SAT. 4*:20; "Bardal: The Police enter the Mission compound and beat several people. See case against Asasuni Daroga..." (*SAT. 5*:33). "Odhir Babu (Bardal) is implicated in a robbery and blackmarketing case. ...He is a bad egg but the pity is that these shopkeepers have plenty of money with which they can buy everything including police" (*SAT. 6*:2).

67 " Bardal: [Surprise visit of S.D.O. to check on smuggling]..... A pity that he informed the daroga of Asasuni thana who will surely see [look] after the interests of his regular contributors!" (*SAT. 6*:27; Cf. *SAT. 5*:23; *SAT. 6*:67).

help to him in improving the Rishis' condition,[68] particularly when trying to cope with the new situation in East Pakistan[69] and to solve Visa problems at Customs for the Rishi Christian traders.[70]

Koster's capacity for dialogue was enhanced by his deep commitment to, and knowledge of the country and its condition in the phases both before and after Independence. His diaries contain many simple notes about the price of commodities,[71] the problem of monetary devaluation and the rate of exchange (*SAT. 5*:20/61; *SAT. 6*:16/30), the state of the crops,[72] the general economic condition of the area,[73] and the 'hardship of the common man' during periods of famine and distress. He looked to industrialisation to make the country self-supporting in the long run.[74] This issue was important for Koster's aim of changing "the Muchi mentality" considered in its self-destructive aspects. Living with the Rishi and their everyday problems, and taking these upon himself, Koster came to discover the

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68 "3-3-1940 Visit Minister of Co-operative Credit and Rural Development, Mr. Mukando Bahroy Mullick who promises support for depressed classes work. I am introduced to Mr. Rajkumar Das, Special Officer for Scheduled Castes, Education, Bengal. These relations may prove very useful. Obtained 300Rs for Muchi schools" (*SAT. 3*:36; cf. SAT. *3*:80).
"Long talk with the District Magistrate. Called his attention to miserable communications, cause of Satkhira being so backward" (*SAT. 4*:14-15).

69 " 17-8-1947. The Award is out. Khulna District goes to Pakistan, a great disappointment for the Hindus. Khulna is a Hindu majority District...We hoist the Pakistan flag. Next day our school joins a Muslim procession.... Let us see what Pakistan brings" (*SAT. 4*:129-130).
" In the afternoon the news come about Jinah's (President of Pakistan) death. We hoisted a black flag at half mast, the first one in [the] whole [of] Satkhira .... In the morning a letter was sent to the S.D.O. expressing our deep grief for the loss of the leader of Pakistan..." (*SAT. 5*:16-17; cf. *SAT. 5*:93).

70 *SAT. 5*:33-4/50). ".... I finally meet the S.D.O. to interview him about passports and visas. The S.D.O. has the power to grant 'A' passport for cultivators and petty tradesmen... He asked permission from D.M. to accept and forward B applications which will greatly simplify business..." (*SAT. 6*:77).

71 The price of rice for instance was registered by Koster at 8/9 Rs. per Maund on 15-8-1942 (*SAT. 4*:154), it increased to 15 Rs. on March 1943 (*SAT. 4*:172), reaching 30Rs. one month later in April 1943 (*SAT. 4*:176). In 1948 the price of rice was still registered at 27/30 Rs. per Maund, but this price is given in Pakistani Rs. (*SAT. 5*:19).

72 " 8-6-1945 Crops. Lack of rain. An hopeful estimate may come to the saving of half of the crop. Prospects are gloomy. Also cloth famine is acute without [a] solution within sight" (*SAT. 4*:46; cf. SAT. *5*:94; *SAT. 6*:45).

73 19-7-1941 "Senergati: terrible misery as elsewhere in the country. No work, price of rice exorbitant....." (*SAT. 3*:105; cf. *SAT. 3*:154).
"Economic condition: Rice in Satkhira Rs. 17.8 per maund. About 15 Rupees everywhere. Incredible hardship for common man. Thefts and lootings are rife. This is not the end of the trouble if Government does not protect the poor" (*SAT. 3*:172/175).
8-6-1945 "There is a craze for food....Black market is lustily carried on and nobody seems to mind it!....Our only salvation is the fact that we have few catechists as few villages are left.....(hardship caused by the war in Europe)" (*SAT. 4*:36b-37b).
3-6-1950 "Conditions: Some Hindus are returning. On 1-7 it was the first time the papers could announce that more Hindus returned to Pakistan compared with the numbers that entered India. The same proportions for Muslims. That gives hope that the exodus has stopped. Great harm was caused as many field were not ploughed. Everybody complains that there is no work as the Hindu landowners disappeared and little money is spent by Muslims for improvement. There has never been the slightest trouble in Satkhira Sub-division. The chief anxiety of the Hindus is the fear of Muslims where women and girls are concerned, the bad economic condition and the lack of opportunity for Hindus to get jobs in Pakistan; of course, Hindus will never forget that the unity of India was taken away, this diminishing its influence and power" (*SAT. 5*:95).
25-2-1951 "Trade pact between India and Pakistan signed. At last they have come to their senses. This should have been done long ago. Now economic position of both countries will surely improve" (*SAT. 6*:29).
6-6-1951 "General Condition of the Country: Price of rice Rs 30 and more per maund in Indian currency. Nobody seems to have Pakistan money. Price of clothing is exorbitant..." (*SAT. 6*:40/54)

74 " East Bengal is wealthy with cash commodities and there are no reasons why with the steady increase of industrial undertakings the country would not be able to be self-sufficient in the long run" (*Our Field*, Nov.-Dec. 1953, XXIX/6:87).

ambiguity of his position: though helping them to reach self-sufficiency he was, nevertheless, fostering the dependency which he had always rejected as an integral part of the "Muchi mentality".

Helping the Rishi to help themselves

Back in 1937 Fr. Dontaine had already realised that the Rishi entrusted the missionary with their entire lives: "They want us to do everything". The Rishi in Satkhira, as in Simulia, found a substitute for the figure of the zamindari in the missionary who had the added advantage of being an easily 'cheated' foreigner,[75] and to whose *doya* (mercy-forgiveness) as 'a man of God' they could appeal. Difficult as it was for Koster to accept his new role, this was how the Rishi saw him: with their land under threat, it was the missionary who retrieved it and safeguarded it from the local zamindar of Baradal. Many other Rishi villages had land problems,[76] and many former Christians lived on mission land.[77] Despite financial difficulties,[78] during his first years in Satkhira, Koster, like his predecessor Dontaine, had been busy buying and protecting mission land,[79] soon realising that "possession of land [meant] influence and power"[80] and that the new Christians would respect him more while living on mission land.[81] This 'temporary measure' was meant to be effective "till their minds [become] more steady". The cost of this pragmatic approach resulted in ambiguity for the missionary who became a zamindar as well as being a priest with subsequent 'misunderstanding' of his intentions.[82] However, the path traced by Koster for the Rishi represented the beginning of a long and uneven journey towards self-reliance.

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75 "Soshi reports from Senergati. .....According to Soshi, Adhin master is trying to influence him to form a united front and try ..... to cheat the Mission as much as possible. ..." (*SAT. 4*:94).

76 *SAT. 3*:46/54. "People of Ramkrisnapur 6 miles East of Kolaroa, come for a second time. They have land troubles". [Only the families involved wanted 'to come over'] (*SAT. 3*:134).

77 " Kharda and Kamarali visited. Many there were baptised by Fr. Wouters and Dessa [1917-27]. All left. They live in 25 bhigas of Mission land. Did not pay rent for some 10 (16) years. If after one month no settlement is reached, I shall sell the land resettling those who behave well" (*SAT. 3*:9).

78 *SAT. 3*:85. "Senergati. . . We are still trying hard to get land" (*SAT. 3*:123).

79 " Property: In Feb. 1939 Fr. Mesaric brought an extensive property of 32 Bhiga. In Nov. it became clear that the titles were not clear..... Busy finding out the real titles and [to] safeguard our mission interests" (*SAT. 3*:16/18). "1-4-1940 Calcutta for land documents. To have the papers examined concerning 40 bhigas of Land in Bardal" (*SAT. 3*:42).

80 " LANDS. More and more I realize that possession of land means influence and power. It seems to be an excellent thing to keep people in land till their minds are more steady. So a number of plots were gradually bought" (*SAT. 3*:140-1).

81 "Senergati. Boys are splendid, people fickle. People in our land... they are now in our hands stabilising our position. The rent they will never pay but they will respect us more" (*SAT. 3*:144).

82 " It was whispered at Nilam that all Bardal would become Christian if the 'Sahib' succeeded in getting the land desired by him" (*SAT. 3*:45).

Koster was initially upset by the poverty, distress, and begging attitude of his people: the Rishi Christians for their part had to face the challenge of the 'new religion' and the demanding attitude of their 'new zamindar':

> All of them complain, all of them expect help. To refuse all is one thing, to keep them going another. I am racking my brains to find a solution to solve this impasse. . . . . (*SAT. 3*:34)

The impasse was destined to continue, because of the many situations of poverty, famine and failure of crops that afflicted Bengal. Though Koster fell into the temptation of giving unconditional help to the Rishi in their chronic distress, he always hoped they would become a group who "stand on their own feet and defend themselves without reliance on guardian angels, in this case the priests and the catechists".[83] He questioned himself: "Can we go on always helping them?" (*SAT. 3*:120), knowing that upon his answer depended the Rishis' future autonomy. Koster was close to their immediate needs, their daily struggle for survival and their position in society[84] and to this end, he favoured their traditional trade[85] both as skinners[86] and bone collectors and bamboo-cane workers. 1952 had been a particularly difficult year for the Rishi and expressions such as 'bitter poverty', 'economic distress' and 'famine conditions', are constantly repeated in the diary. On 4-7 April, after visiting Baradal, Koster concluded: ".... Splendid attendance for Stations of the Cross and Palm Sunday. Economic conditions very bad and hides trade practically at a standstill" (*SAT. 6*:63). The Rishi, earlier described by Koster as people who 'did not understand the value of religion', were maybe finding a new meaning for their struggle: like other oppressed people, the Stations of the Cross appealed to them, and Koster too, inspired by the Rishi, was moving to a new understanding of religion where ritual celebration and daily life intermingle.

Koster, however, was aware that the Rishi could not all "thrive on skins and bones", although they had "no prospect in life except traditional work and trade which the children want to abandon" (*SAT. 3*:165/128). It was mainly the young people that he managed to interest in "honourable manual work"

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83 *Our Field,* Nov.-Dec. 1949, XXV/6:214.

84 *SAT. 3*:93. 31-5/1-6-1941 " Bardal: ...Terrible poverty to cope with, which means the expenditure of a good deal of money. From where to get it ?" (*SAT. 3*:97).

85 "[After the Baradal Rishi invited the missionaries, the local Hindu moneylenders refused them loans] .... What is required now is to get the business of these people going again. They are born traders but reckless. Being dependent now on their own means, those who used to sent out their boats in search of bones and skins are now handicapped...." (*Our Field,* April 1940, XVI/4:87-88; cf. *SAT. 3*:121).

86 Koster was particularly active in promoting the hide trade of the Rishi, especially after Independence when they needed advice to deal with import/export duties: "18-4-1948. Bardal. Business: on account of imposition of export/import duties the trade in hides becomes precarious. Attempts are made to show our people the way how to proceed" (*SAT. 5*:6).
4-10-1951 "... Very few of our traders understand the manipulations of the I.R.P. forms holders. Suppose they have to declare a hide at the value of 6 Rs. Pakistan, they will have to deposit at the rate of 9 Rs. Indian for which they get a return of Pakistan money of the rate of 100 Indian = 69 1/2 Pakistan. So it is evident exporters lose Rs. 2.12 Indian money per hide" (*SAT. 6*:53).

(*SAT. 4*:122), in the village schools and the boarding school in Satkhira,[87] where he started with 13 boarders and one year later, in 1944, there were already 30 pupils.[88] Here, as well as normal daily classes "a training in special subjects to prepare them better" and favour alternative jobs was given;[89] this followed, with some success (*SAT. 5*:9/41), the industrial school model Koster himself had proposed to the Improvement Board for Satkhira town.[90]

Finding alternative means of livelihood would eventually break the vicious circle which trapped the Rishi, and although not himself opposed in principle to their traditional trade, Koster recognised that the Rishi were destined to remain in a low social and economic position unless and until they could free themselves from those who financed their work as skinners. Hindu and Muslim moneylenders viewed Christianity as a unifying force for the Rishi *samaj*, and they attacked Christianity, not as a religion, but as a competitor, creating unrest in the name of religion,[91] in order to prevent the Rishis' growth towards independence.

All this had a double effect on the Christian Rishi community: on the one hand, the young people, by leaving their caste occupation, were establishing a new dialogue with the rest of society. On the other, at least on an individual level, some social mobility proved possible, although the individual was always recognised as belonging to the 'Muchi *jat*' unless he succeeded in disguising his origin. It was during these years that many Rishi Christians of Baradal-Satkhira, started changing their names from Rishi and Das to Mandol, Biswas and Sardar.[92] Koster's work among the Rishi had generated hope for a new relationship with society at large and though motivated by his missionary vocation to 'convert' the Rishi, he developed an attitude towards them which meant more than a simple change of faith.

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87 *Our Field, May*-June 1943, XIX/3:61.

88 " We have 30 pupils almost all drawn from the Muchi caste. Slowly the number of outside pupils is increasing, and the prejudice [against] this caste is wearing down. People are not blind, and many express their astonishment and admiration for the work we are doing for the depressed classes. Unfortunately this admiration is passive and little help may be expected from the public..."(*Our Field,* July-Aug. 1944, XX/4:122).

89 " There are six apprentice carpenters. ... They cannot all be cattle-skinners or bone collectors, or bamboo-mat workers. There is only a limited scope for future masters and catechists..... Our latest experiment is to let our boys have a training as tailors in the bazar. ... This has created a favourable impression among bazar shopkeepers who continually enquire who those boys are. For, it must be said in their favour, our boys behave well and compare favourably not only with their Hindu Muchi friends, but in general with the majority of boys of better castes. It is true, the boys of this caste are as proud as peacocks, but that is not so bad..." (*Our Field,* July-Aug. 1947, XXIII/4:124).

90 It was decided by the Improvement Board "to start with blacksmith, weaving and pottery, the last branch to give [an] outlet for Muslim boys as this trade is so far a monopoly of a Hindu caste" (*SAT. 5*:2).

91 "..... There is a certain unrest which prevents religious development. At the root of all the troubles are interested outsiders who use their position as money lenders to implicate our people whenever they want to hit out at their adversaries. After having created a lot of complications they finally back out without loss of their own interests" (*Our Field*, July-Aug. 1951, XXVII/4:104).

92 *Sat.PA*, 'Baptism Register 1939-1945'.

Another major success for Koster was the education of girls in village schools and despite his initial view that they would not go on to higher education,[93] he later recognised its value for women.[94] These measures, among other things, were destined to raise the marriageable age of girls. Koster had always desired the presence of missionary Sisters[95] to care for girls and women, but he had to be satisfied with their sporadic visits to his mission (*SAT. 3*:11/30). Only in 1957 did the Aloysious Sisters start residing in the Satkhira convent, built by Koster himself, and it was not until 1989 that the Sisters of Charity of Calcutta opened a community in Baradal.

Rishi women in Koster's diaries are generally described as troublesome, inclined to quarrel (*SAT. 5*:7) and deeply attached to former religious practices,[96] offering "incense to God and a little candle to the devil". Among his few positive observations was the suggestion that their double burden of oppression, as 'Muchi' and as women, would open them to the possibilities of freedom through the Christian *samaj* (*SAT. 3*:88; *SAT. 5*:53). He saw instruction for women as the starting point and later entrusted them with the responsibility for education, appointing them as school teachers, an unusual step at that time (*SAT. 6*:1).

Koster's co-workers: teachers and catechists

Initially the Calcutta Jesuits recruited their co-workers from West Bengal, Krishnagar (Simulia), and Dhaka (Gournodi and Narikelbari). Koster's continual difficulties through lack of catechists and money to support them,[97] were heightened by the problems he had to face with the catechists, even at an early stage (*SAT. 3*:112), on account, it seems, of the high standards he had set, since it was very difficult for outsiders 'to become Muchi with the Muchis'.[98] Koster sought to solve the difficulty, by

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93 *Our Field,* Dec. 1941, XVII/8:155.

94 "Also the girls are frequenting the village schools, that is, wherever there is a catechist who is a master at the same time. . . . We are also in sore need of a boarding house and a home for girls and women. The Sisters are willing to come, but the money is still lacking for carrying out this scheme.. " (*Our Field* July-Aug. 1947, XXIII/4:125; cf. *Our field* May-June 1948, XXIV/3:81).

95 *Our Field,* May-June 1949, XXV/3:76.

96 " Dhandia. As Odhor (*matabbar*) did not get a loan, his family does not go to church and he works regularly every Sunday...Last week there was '*monosha puja*' (snake *puja*) under the big '*bot gach*' in the village, to [in] which some of our women participated. They did not come to mass the next Sunday..... [some of them asked Fr. Koster for help without any result] ... The custom is deeply rooted in their hearts! *Sob dike dekte hoe*, incense to god and a little candle to the devil! ... " (*SAT. 4*:83; Cf. *SAT. 4*:121).

97 *SAT. 3*:101; *SAT. 4*:5. "I need not repeat the crying need for good and devoted catechists. We are managing here with a bare minimum, and live in fear and trembling that these few may still abandon us if we are not very kind to them, which kindness has to be expressed in generous allowances enabling them to pass through these frightful and expensive times" (*Our Field,* July-Aug. 1944, XX/4:123).

98 " The catechist's job here is a big one because it takes years to understand the mind of these Muchis. To rule and guide them, everything about their families and relatives has to be carefully studied. Hence, the longer the catechist stays in a village, the better is his grip upon the people. Yet, to become Muchis with the Muchis is very difficult; for the catechist

replacing them with local catechists or at least with Rishi from Simulia mission (*SAT. 3*:159). In both cases, Koster's problems did not diminish since the 'foreign' catechists either cheated the mission (*SAT. 3*:97), abandoned it,[99] or were dismissed on moral grounds.[100] The local Rishi catechists, were no better:[101] their preparation was lengthy and once appointed they were expected to support their relatives,[102] and to adhere to their *samaj* rules, often in opposition to those of the missionary (*SAT. 4*:66). The conflict always resulted either in the dismissal of the teacher-catechist or in the people demanding his removal.[103]

When following the guidelines given by the missionary, the catechist became his representative within the Rishi Christian community, which had the effect of setting the catechist apart from the community. Whilst Rishi catechists were usually able to accommodate to the situation, playing a double game with the people and the missionary (*SAT. 6*:60-1), the catechists from outside, being less dependent on village politics, often contested the authority of the *matabbars*. Furthermore, when Hindu and Muslim *mahajons* wanted to disrupt the unity of the Christian community, they instigated their Rishi contacts to dismiss the faithful catechist, hoping thus to gain control over the community, and especially over those who needed their money. [104]

Despite problems with the catechists-teachers, Koster was convinced of their value to the life of the Christian communities[105] and these in turn recognised the advantage of a catechist in their midst, who served as a pledge and represented the needs of the people to the missionary.[106] Koster spent much time and money preparing and assessing the work of his catechists, running monthly meetings (*SAT.*

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and his wife must cut themselves off from their own country and relatives and always suffer that longing for 'Home, Sweet Home' " (*Our Field,* Dec. 1941, XVII/8:154-5).

99 *SAT. 3*:158; *SAT. 5*:87/92; *Our Field,* July-Aug. 1947, XXIII/4:122-3.

100 ".... Nutonpara catechist caught red-handed cohabiting with a widow. Scandals like this retard our work... Good catechists are rare" (*SAT. 3*:112/181).

101 *Our Field,* July-Aug. 1947, XXIII/4:123. "I come to the conclusion that Louis [catechist of Senergati] has not yet enough judgement to conduct difficult *bicars.* He has his own ways and has not yet shaken off the Muchi mentality. He is notorious for spending more money than budgeted although his work is solid. He cannot understand that the missionary has to cut his clothes according to his cloth" (*SAT. 3*:134).

102 ". . . To employ our own people has been tried but our young men have first to be employed for a good number of years as teachers under our own supervision before they can be entrusted with the care of a village. And as soon as they are taken by the mission, a number of problems crop up. First of all they are considered by their numerous relatives as capitalists thriving under the protecting wings of the missionary. .... Soon the question of marriage turns up and with this the question of a house of their own....." (*Our Field,* May-June 1949, XXV/3:77).

103 *Our Field,* March-April 1947, XXIII/2:44 (Cf. *SAT. 6*:15).

104 The loyalty of Joseph Pande (Paroi), a catechist from Gournodi who had worked in Baradal since 1949 (*SAT. 5*:37/39), revealed a situation of conflict with wide ramifications for all (*Our Field,* Jan.-Feb. 1951, XXVII/1:11; Cf. *SAT. 6*:25).

105 " Senergati: the usual battle....some are coming back again. Only persistence and a catechist without fear and able to stick it out among them can do the trick" (*SAT. 4*:13; Cf. *SAT. 5*:15/18/76; *SAT. 6*:45).

106 " Buria. Some apostates come back but I insist on punishment first. They insist on having a catechist...." (*SAT. 3*:165).

3:81), and though he never encouraged a catechist to trade (*SAT. 6*:17), he certainly passed on to them some of his business skills, allowing them to invest the money of the pension fund that he himself had created for them.[107] All in all, their relationship was a fruitful one and he certainly rejoiced when they obtained results in the eyes of the rest of society, bettering thus the reputation of the Christians.[108] During this period, many of the Rishi catechists and teachers, especially those in the northern area, started to distance themselves, as required by the missionary, from the Hindu Rishi *samaj*, establishing relationships with the wider society. When in 1982, the mission in Satkhira wanted to call a meeting of all the catechists belonging to the Rishi group, they met with the outraged reaction of the Satkhira Christians, who were offended by being associated with the 'Rishi'. The teachings of the old missionary mentality had left their impression[109] and recent missionary attitudes, more open to dialogue even with the Hindu Rishi, had to face the consequences of this legacy from a time when dialogue was still finding its difficult way into the mentality of the missionary, let alone into the Christian community itself.

The dilemma of Christian Marriage

The implementation of 'Christian marriage' has always been an area of conflict between missionaries and their converts and in Satkhira mission was to prove the most refractory of all their problems, involving the missionary, the Hindu and Christian Rishi, the caste Hindus, the Muslims and at times the Police.

If 'caste' had somehow been tolerated and even absorbed by Christian communities in general, Hindu marriage practices had always been seen as an obstacle to making new converts and leading them towards Christian ethics. This dilemma was particularly acute for Catholic missionaries who, apart from not approving of polygamy, did not and could not, according to their laws, give permission for divorce. The evolution of the concept of marriage as a 'minor fault for a major good' - aiming at sexual relations for procreation - was still basic to Catholic moral theology when these missionaries were working among the Rishi, and the more open theology which sees the love of two people as the fundamental principle in the 'sacrament of marriage', was still to come. Consequently, the missionaries

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107 " Louis Biswas has a chance to buy 72 *satak* field... I agree to let him buy. Better spend the pension fund money on land now prices are coming down considerably. . . . . Soshi Biswas (Senergati) buys another 2 1/2 *bhiga* of land ...." (*SAT. 6*:46/49).

108 *SAT. 6*:49. " Daniel Gain [from Sriula, a village later abandoned by Koster, was at that time teacher at the Satkhira Boarding and later headmaster for many years] gets news that he passed his matric exam. The first Christian of this caste who has risen to this dazzling status. He is promoted to the post of Headmaster-boarding-master" (*SAT. 6*:44).

109 "..... It is true, the boys of this caste are as proud as peacocks, but that is not so bad. They are now Christians, and as such they look down on their old caste, considering themselves far superior. Let them be convinced of their privileged position and let them show that the Christians are better than the rest....." (*Our Field*, July-Aug. 1947, XXIII/4:124).

were adamant in imposing on the Rishi Christians a new value which represented for them an immutable divine law, which not even the Pope could change.[110]

The Rishi institution of marriage occupies an important place in the life of the *samaj* and, along with *sraddha*, symbolised the unity and solidarity of the group. If *sraddha* represented the celebration of old alliances within the *samaj*, marriage was meant to represent new alliances, always needed in the often volatile cohesion of the Rishi. Marriage exchange exemplified for the Rishi the highest point of belonging to the group, and in this sense embodied the real meaning of *rakter than* in its *samajik* or communitarian aspect. Marriage was a matter which primarily concerned the *samaj* and not the individual, and no marriage was considered valid without the consent of the community, represented by the *matabbars*. The *barakhana* or 'feeding of the *matabbars*' was the seal that guaranteed the social recognition of marriage, which could not be broken without the approval of the community leaders, under penalty of excommunication. As a part of community life, marriage had to follow the same laws governing other activities, even though these laws were constantly threatened by circumstances which nullified them. In survival situations, very frequent for the Rishi, marriage alliances or divorce became a kind of business partnership. The Rishis' divorce customs, perceived as 'unlawful' by the missionaries, found their logical explanation within this framework of exchange-business alliance, which predominated over the 'sacramental' value of marriage. Furthermore, the governing principle of Catholic ethics, a personal God interested in the life and deeds of his children, was alien to the mind of the Rishi; their God was near enough to be loved, but too remote to be interested in their marriage problems. Presumably, this too formed part of what Koster called 'the Muchi mentality'. This confrontation of two different value systems approaches here the limiting case of dialogue: the possibility of meeting, communicating and exchanging with 'the other' in spite of profound dissimilarities and even contradictions.

Koster early on had to face pressure from the members of his community to marry with the Hindu Rishi,[111] and though it was mostly well-accepted that marriage outside the Christian *samaj* meant a return to the Hindu Rishi *samaj*,[112] at times the Christian Rishi would seek permission to perform a Hindu marriage, to be regularised later on.[113] The missionary, anxious to protect his flock, tended to see the Christians as a new endogamous group. This tendency was also favoured by some Hindu Rishi

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110 "..... The solution is simple enough: we cannot give permission to anyone who wants to become Christian to keep two wives: one wife, one husband! In practice, they did not understand this; even when we said that the Bishop or even the Pope could not grant such a permission, they were absolutely at sea....." (Fr. Bauwens in *Our Field*, Jan.-Feb. 1939, XV/1:6).

111 " In Dhandia some marriage cases: Christian daughters given to Muchis...." (*SAT. 3*:131).

112 *SAT. 3*:27; *SAT. 4*:42-3; *SAT. 5*:4/24/43.

113 "...'Please, Father, allow my son to contract marriage before the Brahmin. We shall make her a Christian later on when you'll perform our own marriage.....'. That is a common petition and a quite reasonable one from their point of view..." (*Our Field*, May-June 1948, XXIV/3:80).

who would "not consent to a Catholic marriage for their girls, being afraid that connections will be broken off later on".[114] Though this position was at times shared by Christian Rishi, they mostly considered themselves as belonging to the Rishi group as a whole, with whom they were constantly involved in trade and business, and with whom they themselves negotiated marriage too.

Given the 'limited demography of marriage' (Caplan 1987:46), Koster was sensitive to the lack of brides among the young converts, especially when Christian girls were given in marriage to Hindu Rishi (*SAT. 5*:4); hence "a score of marriageable young men [had] to wait",[115] and missionary efforts to solve this ended in failure.[116]

Another major problem facing Koster was the custom of early marriage (*SAT. 5*:4), which persisted among Rishi Christians justified by the Hindu tradition of a father's duty before death. Koster strongly opposed such 'immoral practices',[117] pointing out that early marriage was related to the shortage of girls, the high price of a dowry, and the poor economic condition of the Rishi.[118] One solution proposed by Koster, used especially when the leaders were involved in following 'old traditions',[119] was to make the girl's father sign a contract, and later resorting to the law and the police (*SAT. 4*:48; *SAT. 5*:6).

In the absence of any other authority[120] Koster sought Police intervention to defend young girls and abandoned wives and to prevent unscrupulous Christian leaders from establishing marriage and business

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114 Ibid.

115 "... I do not see any solution. According to the Government census of 1930 there is a shortage of females among this caste all over Bengal, the proportion being 90 females to 100 males. Hence competition of the worst kind. In one village a number of Christians have deserted in order to find girls" (*Our Field,* May-June 1948, XXIV/3:80).

116 The Salesians of Simulia did not consent to intermarriage because of previous bad experiences when the Christians of Satkhira-Baradal had married Simulia girls and had later abandoned them: "Fr. Demsar to Simulia. ....As to the future relations with Simulia they [the Salesians] are not willing to marry off girls to our Mission people as they had bad experience before, when husbands turned Muchi again thus throwing the legal wives on their parents. Oh, that *nike* business!" (*SAT. 5*:4).
"Joshi from Senergati returns empty-handed from his tour of Simulia Mission where he went to look for a bride. (He will try Narikelbari)" (*SAT. 5*:37).

117 "... Among these low castes early engagements are dangerous as relations are established which are leading to immorality. The parents are already considered as fathers and mothers-in-law. There is a continual coming and going. The old traditional customs are still prevailing, good and bad ones ... " (*Our Field,* May-June 1948, XXIV/3:81).

118 ".... Another difficulty concerns the Christian girls whose dowry has gone as high as Rs. 150 to Rs. 200. Not being able to dispose of their girls before the legal age of 14 [for Christian Marriage], the parents cannot resist the temptation of getting such a fat dowry, when they are in financial difficulties . . . Of course, there is the shortage of girls and a score of candidate for each and every good-looking young lady. Dowries are going up. Everybody tries to be in time. Hence those early engagements ..." (*Our Field* May-June 1948, XXIV/3:81). "Bardal.... Quiet. Poverty and much distress. Impossible to help all... Bhuto's daughter, Elisabeth, is still absent in Sriula with her uncle. Ramcharan Muchi is offered 150 Rs. for her marriage with his widowed son. Terrible poverty is a great temptation... " (*SAT. 6*:51).

119 " We are trying our level best to shorten the time of engagements, but it is a hard fight, especially when the leaders are guilty and not willing to put out a hand [lift a finger] to stop it, or giving [a] bad example where their own children are concerned. That means a fight with everyone of them and friction between the priest and his flock" (*Our Field,* May-June 1948, XXIV/3:81). Koster optimistically concluded this passage: "...It will take a full generation to settle this matter".

120 *Our Field,* May-June 1950, XXVI/3:84.

alliances with Hindu Rishi with the co-operation of Muslim and Hindu *mahajons* (*SAT.* 5:5-7;49). Once the Christians realised that the missionary attached such importance to marriage matters, these became a contested terrain used either to threaten or to bribe the missionary in exchange for other favours (*SAT.* 5:50-1), a policy adopted particularly by the *matabbars*, as a way to regain some of their power.[121] Conversely, when the missionary was needed to celebrate marriages, the Christians responded with 'religious devotion', highly appreciated by him (*SAT.* 5:40).

The last obstacle confronted by Koster was the custom of '*nike* marriages'; often when a man was dissatisfied with his wife, had problems with in-laws, or agreements were broken after marriage, the easy solution was to return the wife to her parents, taking another as a 'temporary' wife (*SAT.* 2:135; 5:25; 6:31). The individual responsible would of course be considered *dharma dusi* by the missionary, thus giving rise to new conflicts, since the *matabbars* often would not consider him a *dusi* from the *samaj* viewpoint.[122]

Koster had written, at the very beginning of his long stay among the Rishi, "only patience and work at long range will make them better".[123] Ten years on he was still trying to 'change their mentality': ".... The chief difficulty with our people here is their inclination to go their own way. As a result it is difficult to enforce our laws and customs". He had, however, gained sufficient experience to understand that "to be too strict is ruinous and to be too lenient is disastrous. The middle way is the best but difficult to find...".[124]

The Rishis' response to Christianity and theories of conversion

The Rishi accepted Christianity because they were in need of protection from the missionary, but not all the Rishi who needed protection 'converted', and not all those who 'converted', persevered. The Rishi, belonging to a popular Hindu religious tradition had never, or rarely, benefited from the 'official' religion, which was, in their eyes, a commodity for a privileged group. On the one hand, they also shared the ideology of the caste Hindus who did not consider the Rishi capable of '*dharmik*' sentiments, and on the other they tried to express *dharmikata* through their own 'popular religiousness'. Christianity was seen by the Rishi as having two advantages: firstly, it replaced the commodity they

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121 ".... The nasty thing is that it is always the leaders who play such tricks, whereas the people of more humble standing are inclined to listen. . . . " (*Our Field,* May-June 1950, XXVI/3:83).

122 "Bardal. ... For the rest no trouble any more in Bardal. Also Buryia is quiet. Bonko comes again to church. The only [one] absent is Jamini. Jamini took a *nike* wife and thus is *ipso facto* a *dusi.* He is laughed at by everybody but never had any shame. . . . " (*SAT.* 6:27-28).

123 *Our Field,* April 1940, XVI/4:89.

124 *Our Field,* May-June 1950, XXVI/3:83.

did not receive from their Hindu brethren and, secondly, it was a way of showing to the rest of society, in many external ways, that they possessed '*dharma*'. Both the Rishi and the missionary were fully aware of this reality: the Rishi turned to Christianity to realise present and future hopes in the belief that they had nothing to lose, for not even the promises made by the Hindu Mahashaba would change their future within the Hindu *samaj* (*SAT. 3*:77; *SAT. 3*:103). The missionary, on the other hand, though aware of the reasons which motivated the Rishi to accept Christianity, hoped that these would change. Furthermore, he believed in God as the master of history, and even the history of the Rishi was to be read from this perspective: oppression and hardship opening a way for the Rishi to attain God and 'salvation'. Thus he remained faithful to the teachings of the Gospel which announced the 'Good News to be preached to the poor'. This way of re-reading history is still relevant to the Rishi of Baradal today since they present the same arguments to explain their first adherence to Christianity.

In seeking to understand which 'theory of conversion' fits the Rishi case, it seems that the emphasis placed on 'theory' rather than on 'conversion', diverts attention from the real problem. Heelas and Haglund-Heelas, examining Lienhardt's study, 'The Dinka and Catholicism', refer to it "as an account in which Dinka expectations, Dinka understanding of Christianity and what it can provide, are examined as aspects of a situation which goes way beyond anything which can be captured by theories of conversion" (Heelas & Haglund-Heelas 1988:119). Earlier on, discussing the 'deprivation theory', they pointed out that "although deprivation cannot be a complete theory, there are still good reasons for taking it into account in the study of conversion" (Ibid.: 118). The historical material from missionary sources so far discussed, leaves few doubts as to the context of deprivation of the Rishi, and this context indeed represents a crucial point in the Rishis' desire to adhere to Christianity. However, it is important to find other aspects of a complex situation. These include the internal structure of the Rishi group, their alliances within and outside the group, the presence of missionary personnel within a given area and the attitude of these towards the Rishi. Furthermore, the problem of conversion discussed here, needs to be identified within a very specific frame of reference. The idea of 'conversion' had experienced a noticeable evolution within Catholic theology, assuming a new position as the missionaries' attitude matured in an 'unconscious dialogue' with the peoples they were seeking to convert. Koster's preoccupation with consolidating rather than expanding the Rishi Christian community, indicates, apart from a choice dictated by common sense, the idea of a community present in the world as a 'seed and a sign of the Kingdom of God', and not its completion. This ecclesiology, born from a situation of minority and humility, helped to further the future understanding of conversion. When Koster was working among the Rishi in Satkhira-Baradal, the Church was still adamant that only those belonging to the Church could obtain 'eternal salvation'. Koster, however, could not believe that millions were going to be condemned by God for not belonging to his Christian community, which, among other things, was far from perfect. Nominal 'conversion' or affiliation-aggregation to Christianity could not possibly represent the only way to reach God. However much the missionaries rejected other religions, this did not prevent some from recognising a sincere quest for

God in people of goodwill belonging to the Hindu or Muslim community. Moreover, the attitude of the Rishi towards Christianity was one of uncertainty and indecision: their going back and forth,[125] their urge to return to former religious practices (especially when in particular need), and to have recourse to those symbols which were meaningful to them,[126] the defence by the old people of their former 'religion',[127] their attachment to 'certain habits' (*SAT. 4*:7), and the regret felt by young people at having adopted a new religion,[128] combined to make Koster realise that 'conversion' was for the Rishi a long process still at an initial stage. Furthermore, avoiding "the somewhat sterile debate as to whether the principal motives [for conversion] were 'temporal' and 'spiritual' ", given that these are part of a 'package deal' and inseparable, though distinguishable for analytical purposes (Caplan 1987:38), it must be recognised that

> ... the initial reasons for conversion may have had little bearing on the individual's subsequent commitment to the new religion, and even less on that of his or her descendants (Ibid.).

The 'deprivation theory' of conversion, or any other theory for that matter, explains only sections of the entire phenomenon leaving some of the major questions practically unresolved (see Caplan 1987: 37-42). In the case of deprivation theory, for instance, missionary ideology which places crucial emphasis on the 'evangelization of the poor' as its main thrust, must be considered particularly relevant. At the same time, the missionary living for a considerable number of years amidst a 'poor community', is able to appreciate the slow and sometimes frustrating progress made by the community in terms of Christian growth, so that conversion can no longer be considered a given reality once and for all, but rather must be accepted as a process, or at least as a 'complex of factors' (ibid.:43). It is this processual character of conversion which makes it impossible for any theory to encapsulate such a

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125 " Goalchator became Muchi again + Hindu *Sobha*, shaved their heads....." (*SAT. 3*:12; Cf. SAT. *3*:31/130/132; *SAT. 4*:11; *SAT. 5*:51).
"North (Dhandia-Senergati).....The old leaders do not tolerate upstart *matbars* as Bokul and the *Jubak Samiti*. Father dismissed the case [a young man was accused of adultery] as there were no proofs. Hence revolution and talks of 'going Muchi' " (*SAT. 4*:113).

126 " Bardal:. . . . Bonko's mother was fined 10 Rupees for having gone to a Hindu place to seek [a] cure for her grandson who was reputed to have been cured by a *Sadhu*" (*SAT. 4*:83).
"Senergati: some have turned Muchi again following the refusal of Christians to perform *Puja* for recovery of a sick child. Real reason is probably animosity between different *dals*" (*SAT. 3*:133).
"Tara Gain arrives from Bardal. According to him only Kanai Gain, his mother and father, became Muchis. The others paid *chanda*, partook in *puja* but deny having left our religion...." (*SAT. 5*:44).

127 " Dhandia: ... Rumour is spread[ing] that Pachu *Gosai* declared himself Muchi, and tried to justify his step by saying that '*gosai-dharma*' is above all religions. He is called to the meeting to declare [himself] clearly to which religion he belongs. After futile evasive answers, he is cornered and declares before all that he is a '*Hindu Dharmer madhe Gosai*'. Defending himself he says that '*gosai dharma*' is a secret religion which cannot be disclosed to those who do not belong to it. They make *Puja* to God, whose name cannot be disclosed. But he wants his two sons Peter and Odhir to remain Christians. He is told to leave our *Samaj* and our people are forbidden to have any contact with him, or call him for *bichars*" (*SAT. 4*:87).

128 " Buria ... The youngster Binod Sarkar went off his head: "*Amra sob Somaj Mitthay badi. Christian hoye amra ki labh peyechi. Muchi jodi thakbhan bhalo hoto.* [We are all liars. What did we gain by becoming Christians? It would have been better for us to remain Muchi.....]" To give them a good lesson I simply left the village after having demanded first that the morols should take Binod to task... " (*SAT. 6*:51).

'moving' reality, unless the theory itself moves along with those involved in the process.[129] At this point, however, we can no longer consider it as a theory, but rather as a continuous, elusive hypothesis.

The history of the mission among the Rishi during 1937-1952 is but one example of the inapplicability of those 'theories of conversion' which see it as a total event. Likewise, the following period, which brought new missionaries to the field amid significant socio-political changes in East Pakistan/Bangladesh, will highlight more vividly the development of this process in the contemporary circumstances in which Rishi and missionaries find themselves. However, in Satkhira-Baradal the missionaries and the Rishi had already succeeded in establishing a tenuous dialogue, and it can be suggested that it was at this stage that the 'Mission' started to be associated more with dialogue than with conversion.

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129 The 'intellectualist theory' on conversion advocated by R. Horton and J.D.Y. Peel, is founded on two premises: 1) people adapt to new situations in terms of their existing attitudes and ideas; 2) people assimilate new ideas because these make sense to them in terms of the notions they already hold (Horton and Peel 1976:482). Furthermore, Peel considers conversion as "the process by which individuals came to label themselves as Christians or.... Muslims" (Peel 1973: 343). M. Warburg (1986:226) commenting on the intellectualist theory, sees conversion as "a highly selective process by which individuals gradually assimilate new attitudes and behaviour rather than a radical break with the past and a rebirth of the human being". R. Robertson defines 'conversion' broadly as a "problem area, with special reference to its intersection with culture". H. Mol (1976:51) sees conversion as a "the adoption of a new orientation, a re-ordering of priorities and values, the break between the past and the present". To prove his theory that "the old identity is forcibly obliterated and emotionally diffused, in order that a new identity can come to fruition", he needs to distinguish different stages in the mechanism of conversion, reverting in a way to the processual character of conversion. He thus concludes: "The process of conversion sometimes becomes a substitute for the new identity..."(Mol 1976:55). Although this variety of theories seems to be of little assistance to our specific case, they are nevertheless relevant for an understanding of the missionaries' position who, being concerned for the 'salvation' of individual souls, did not reach the subcontinent 'empty-handed' nor, above all, 'empty-headed'. (Forrester 1980: 193). Since this subject occupies a prominent place in missionary discussion of the Rishis' conversion, I will return later to focus on theories which rather than paying attention to cultural or psychological explanations, place their emphasis on power relations, accentuating the role of conversion as a "social protest" (Fernandes 1984).

PART THREE

The Xaverians and the Rishi
(1952-1990)

Introduction

At the Partition of India, the most eastern territories of Krishnagar and Calcutta Catholic Dioceses fell into East Pakistan. To take care of these territories Pius XII created the Diocese of Jessore, by a Bull dated 3rd January, 1952.[1] When Jesuits, Salesians and other missionary congregations refused to take charge of Jessore,[2] the Xaverians were contacted and, according to their Constitution, could not refuse. They belonged to one of the four missionary institutes created in Italy during the 19th Century,[3] and started as a localised and regional phenomenon of the northern Italian Church in response to the Pope's appeal to resurrect missionary enterprise.[4] Their founder, Guido Conforti, Bishop of Ravenna and Parma, himself unable to fulfil his missionary vocation, became a founder of missionaries.

Almost one hundred years after Marietti had started preaching in Jessore, by a Decree dated 19th January, 1952, the SCPF (Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide), appointed Mgr. D. Battaglierin S.X. as the first Apostolic Administrator of Jessore. On July 3rd, 1952, Mgr. Battaglierin and four other Xaverians[5] left the port of Genoa bound for Bombay in an Italian cargo boat,[6] from where they proceeded to Calcutta. Here they were received by the Salesians, and by Fr. Dagnino, former Superior General of the Xaverians, who had recently been expelled from China. After visiting the Archbishop, they departed for Krishnagar where they were received by Bishop Marrow. On August 1st., the five Xaverian Fathers left for Jessore, while Mgr. Battaglierin stayed behind to receive the exchange of powers from the Krishnagar Bishop, before joining them on the 20th of that month.

The arrival of a new missionary group came at a time of great regional changes. The first and most important of these was the relative unification under the same religious territory of two Rishi Christian

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1 Territory of the Diocese: Civil Districts of Khulna, Jessore and Kushtia, plus the Sub-divisions of Sadar and Goalundo of the Faridpur District and the Police Stations of Kasiani and Mukssudpur of the Gopalganj Sub-division.

2 "Nobody wanted to accept this new diocese..... It was a well known and evident fact that during the war, and also the period spent by the missionaries in concentration-camps, those Christian communities had suffered much damage due to the abandonment in which they had found themselves" (Battaglierin 1965: 337).

3 The others being the PIME of Milan, who preceded the Xaverians in Krishnagar, the Consolata missionaries of Turin, and the Comboni missionaries of Verona, the latter especially dedicated to the evangelization of Africa.

4 At their initial stage their association was called the 'Seminario Emiliano per le Missioni Estere', just as the PIME was called the 'Seminario Lombardo'.

5 The four missionaries were the Frs. A. Alberton, V. Dalla Valle, A. Tessaro, M. Chiofi. The first three came, like Mgr. Battaglierin, from the Venetia region, while the last came from Rome.

6 The Cargo 'Risano' of the Lloyd Triestino. (*Chronicle*: 11, *DAK*)

areas: Simulia in the North and Satkhira/Baradal in the South. For the Rishi this meant an intensification of contacts and exchanges which compensated for their separation from the Rishi of West Bengal. By moving the centre of missionary activity from Calcutta and Krishnagar to Jessore and later to Khulna (1956)[7], the Rishi found themselves no longer at the periphery of missionary territory and attention, but at the very heart of it. This was particularly opportune for the Baradal Rishi who, cut off from their commerce with Calcutta and needing new areas of trade, moved to the north in great numbers, in search of a better life. In the ensuing years, the Christian Rishi were able, to a certain extent, to interact more freely with Catholics from other groups and even though the process has been slow and sometimes painful, intermarriage occasionally occurs. Their horizon has also been broadened by their participation in the overall Catholic community of Bangladesh, especially since the 1980s, when some of them have been ordained priests and others are preparing for priesthood.

The Xaverians noticed very early that the Rishi were the only ones offering a certain guarantee of Church growth, since neither caste Hindus nor Muslims were inclined to convert, and accounted their first period in the mission as a "time of grace and salvation for the Rishi". History, however, was destined to repeat itself both in the missionaries' attitudes, and in the Rishi response to their proposal. Though closer now to the centre, they were not the sole focus of interest, and only some of the missionaries intensified their activity among them. Vatican II theology was to influence missionary policy by moving away from the idea of bringing 'salvation' to the 'heathens'. This brought not only an increased respect for local religions and cultures, requiring an adaptation of the Christian message, but it also led a pluralistic view of missionary activity which was destined to replace the old monolithic one. The phenomenon of secularization which informed western Christianity, reached the mission territory through the new mission theology and fresh missionaries arriving in the field who, being trained during or after Vatican II, certainly held a different orientation from their predecessors, and accordingly applied this to their activity. On the other hand, the missionaries already in the field had not been passive recipients of this new theology, but had supplied constructive feedback to the Church at home, where their ideas and experiences took the form of theological reflection and doctrinal charisma. It is in this sense that we have read the history of the missionary groups who preceded the Xaverians: an unconscious 'dialogue' formed the reality of everyday encounters, only later recognised at an official level as the prerequisite of every missionary attempt.

Problems arose, however, when the missionaries in the field, as well as those at home, publicised their reflection on issues such as 'dialogue with the non-Christian Religions', the 'politics' of western countries in relation to the Third World, and the involvement of the Church in international politics. Pope John Paul II in the Encyclical Letter ' *Redemptoris Missio* ', insists that "dialogue does not

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7 "I receive today from the Internuntiatura of Karachi the Decree of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide N. 2544/56, dated 14-6-1956, with which our Diocese is transferred to Khulna, with the new name of '*Khulnensis*' ". (*Chronicle*: 2-7-'56: 102).

dispense from evangelization" and that "dialogue should be conducted and implemented with the conviction that the Church is the ordinary means of salvation and that she alone possesses the fullness of the means of salvation".[8] While I leave theologians to solve the enigmatic nature of these statements, which resemble the old "Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus", the wording seems to show a certain apprehension towards the attitude of those missionaries who, without renouncing their Christian testimony, have become much more critical towards an assimilation of the 'Other'. 'Conversion' is no longer seen as the only way to 'Salvation', and nominal adherence to Christianity is not valued as the *conditio sine qua non* of the Church's success. As stated by the biblical theologian Alfred Loisy (1857-1940), later condemned by the Church for being 'Modernist': "Jesus preached the Kingdom of God, but the Church was born". Indeed, the first Xaverians to reach the field in 1952 had to make their profession of faith and take the 'anti-modernist' oath, when put in charge of a Parish. This is no longer the case and some missionaries are learning to be guests in foreign lands, accepting the humble reality of a Church which is more a sign of the Kingdom than its plenitude. This new situation is also reflected in the missionary attitude towards the non-Christian Rishi and their possible conversion to Christianity.

The first Xaverians in East Pakistan soon faced the difficulties of their new mission: none of them spoke English or Bengali; they belonged to a nation that had recently lost a war and with a poor record of colonisation. With few available means, they had to rely on the insufficient allowances received from the Vatican, personal donations from Italy and gifts from the American Government and Episcopate. Having recently been expelled from China, and for some years living in fear of the same fate in East Pakistan,[9] they could not but adopt a humble attitude towards their mission. As confidence and financial means gradually increased, they engaged in several activities, some of which were disrupted either by natural disasters or by historical events, such as the 1971 Independence War. Above all, however, it has been the self-criticism of some missionaries which has cast doubts on their role as 'relief agents' and 'developmentists'. Despite their life-long commitment to humanitarian aid, the missionaries became increasingly aware of their ambiguous role in a foreign country. Their identity has suffered a significant shift and their presence is questioned not only by local government but also by the local Church, which they profess to 'serve'; the road from 'masters' of a mission territory to 'servants' has not been easy for them. The response to this complex reality could represent either the last face of a decadent colonialism or the new face of the western Self in relation to its 'Other'. We assess these alternatives here through a study of the interaction between the Missionaries and the Rishi over approximately the last 40 years,

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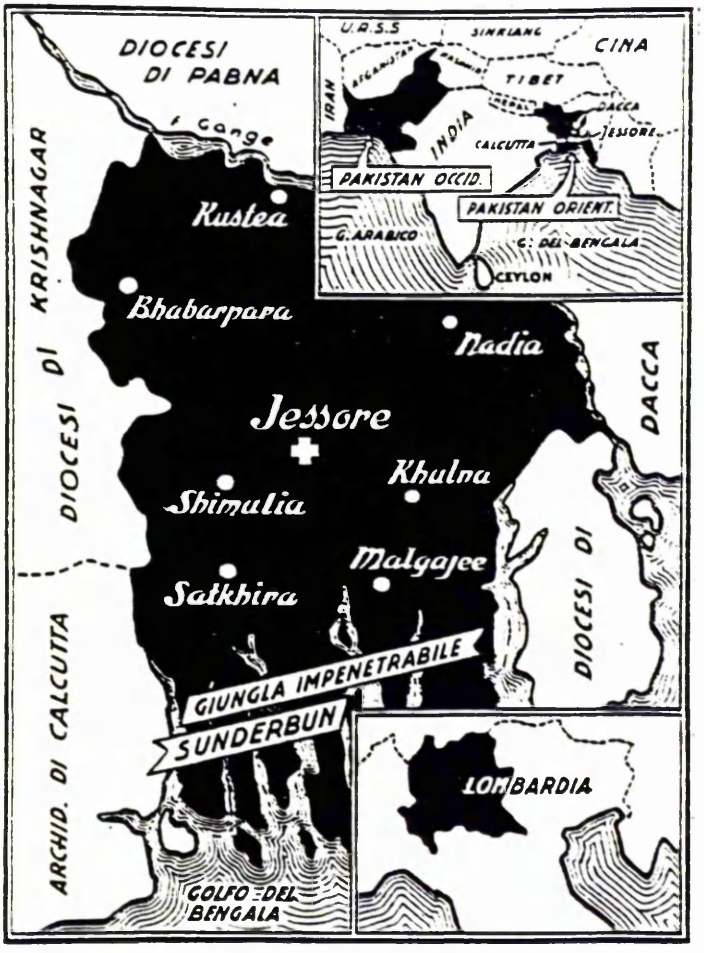
8 John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Encyclical Letter on the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate, 7th Dec., 1990. Catholic Truth Society, London 1991: 38-9. (The encyclical was written on the 25th anniversary of the Conciliar Missionary Decree *'Ad Gentes '*). In this context, the Pope quotes also his previous Letter addressed to the Fifth Plenary Assembly of Asian Bishops' Conference (23 June 1990): " Although the Church gladly acknowledges whatever is true and holy in the religious traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam as a reflection of that truth which enlightens all men, this does not lessen her duty and resolve to proclaim without fail Jesus Christ who is 'the way and the truth and the life'....." (Ibid.)

9 The Salesians, whom they were replacing, warned them about the precariousness of this mission and the strong possibility of expulsion.

relating this history to the broader horizon of the Catholic Diocese of Khulna, which is not, in its turn, separated either from the Church in Bangladesh, the Church in Asia, or the Universal Church, but which still maintains its character as a particular, localised, vernacular Church and Christianity.

A chronological progression by decades will help to highlight the main events of the period as they affected both the mission and the history of the country. This, however, should not allow us to lose contact with the primary agents of our history, the Rishi and the missionaries, for it is within this microcosm that we want to assess the changes and continuities of a 'mission', in a particular place and at a given time. Again extensive notes are given for the benefit of missionaries working in this field and also as providing a picture of the working life and problems of Catholic missions today.



Diocese of Jessore (later Khulna) in 1955.
(Source: *Fede e Civiltà* 1955/7-8:191).

1. First Decade

Difficult beginnings

On their arrival in Jessore the Xaverians, who were expected to take charge of five missionary stations,[1] lamented the neglect and abandon of the mission and the communities.[2] The rapid withdrawal of the Salesians[3] had accentuated the shortage of personnel and their lack of preparation, the poor economic situation of the mission[4] and the extreme poverty of the Christians.[5] These difficulties were destined to persist during the whole decade and despite an early policy favouring the self-reliance of the Christians,[6] they always remained dependant on missionary aid.[7] The initial shortage of personnel had to be compensated for by the 'sanctity' of the missionaries,[8] their virtues of hope and humility, and the collaboration of sisters and catechists.

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1 The stations of Bhabarpara, Simulia, Jessore and Khulna were cared for by seven Salesians, while the Jesuit Fr. Koster was in Satkhira-Baradal.

2 " I [Mgr. Battaglierin] arrive in Jessore late at night. What an awful state! Carelessness, neglect and disorder, despite the slum-clearance done during these past few days.... May the Lord sustain us and accept our sacrifices for a good success in this diocese which has been practically abandoned since the beginning of the war [1943-4]....." (*Chronicle*: 13)

3 " The Salesians left the mission later than announced (at our arrival), but the continuous pressure of staying alone all too soon became a nightmare for us from the very first day.... Our Confrères had to take charge of the missionary stations only three months after their arrival, without possessing either the language or a missionary tradition, which is needed for a field new to us" (Battaglierin to G. Gazza, 18-7-1953, *DAK* - File 35).

4 " Economically we found ourselves in great difficulties due to the lack of benefactors and because none of us could have foreseen the tremendous expenses which were needed to keep the activities going" (Battaglierin to G. Gazza, 18-7-1953, *DAK* - File 35).

5 " The poverty of our Christians is impressive, all over the area. The majority of them belong to the lowest castes and they rarely possess property" (Ibid.).

6 " To give for free is often the wrong form of charity, while promoting collaboration unites the Christians and educates them....." (Circular Letter N° 2, Jessore 5-11-1952, *DAK*/File 10). "... Insist on the Christians and the villages giving their contribution, so that we do not perpetuate the abuse of the 'rice Christians'....." (Circular Letter N° 9, Jessore, 16-12-1953, *DAK* - File 10).
"....The diocese is not in a position to increase the scarce contribution that it already gives you. We have to look for other sources of income, reduce the expenses and eliminate those who cannot be honestly paid. Try to make the goods of the individual communities fructify to a maximum, so that they can reach self-sufficiency. ..." (Circular Letter N° 23, 31-3-1959, *DAK* - File 10).

7 " Even though everything we have achieved can be considered good, we are still among neophytes who are weak not only because newly converted, but also because they live in a difficult setting, perhaps having been allured by the USA gifts, or having followed Catholicism because of their discouragement after the British retired" (Circular Letter N° 20, 2-7-1957, *DAK* - File 10).

8 " We must be 'founders' and thus we must possess to the full the virtues, the zeal, and the commitment which have characterised the Saints who initiated God's accomplishments. ....." (Circular Letter N° 1, Calcutta, 13-8-1952, *DAK* - File 10).
".... Let us sanctify and convert everything in a spirit of penance: climate, hot weather, illnesses, every kind of difficulty, and let us keep our body ready to overcome all this with apostolic ardour....." (Circular Letter N° 7, 12-6-1953, *DAK* - File 10).

Although the missionaries were preoccupied with the conversion of the 'natives', whom they considered as their 'adoptive children',[9] most of their energy, money and attention was absorbed by the "insignificant minority" of Christians. On this account, Battaglierin pointed out that the missionaries were becoming 'urbanised', remaining in the centres and not fulfilling their 'specific vocation *ad paganos*'. With the civil authority the missionaries had a relationship of mutual respect, aided by the opening of Catholic schools to non-Catholics, and since religious affiliation was respected, the missionaries were "prudently absent from political competition, being happy to illuminate and guide the conscience of the faithful".[10] To raise the quality of their Christians, the missionaries intensified religious instruction, started village schools, created permanent catechumenates and taught pre-marriage courses, with the aim of promoting the 'sanctity of family life'. The involvement of the laity, with special attention to the role of the village headmen, was intended to favour the growth of the local Church (*plantatio ecclesiae*), seen as the primary task of missionary activity.[11] A 'special mission' was preached in stations and parishes during 1958-59[12] to increase Christian awareness and to favour the development of local priestly and religious vocations for whose benefit a seminary and a convent were opened in Simulia.[13] Though many of the first candidates for priesthood left the seminary, frustrating missionary hopes, some temporary results were obtained with a local congregation of nuns. However, this too eventually resulted in failure since it was the work of an individual missionary supported only by Battaglierin.

If the difficulty of adapting to a new environment -many new missionaries had to repatriate due to health problems and one of them died in 1960- was eventually overcome, other difficulties continued to preoccupy the missionaries over the whole period. Of these the main obstacle to the development of a co-ordinated policy was the lack of agreement between the missionaries and the Bishop. Very early on Mgr. Battaglierin lamented the missionaries' lack of obedience to his directives, and later, after his first Pastoral visit as Bishop (1955-56), he asked them to maintain uniformity of action and a spirit of dependence. This was recalled later at the 1958 annual meeting, when the Bishop urged them to consider the problems of the whole diocese in their plans. Though individual enterprise and lack of material

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9 "... Natives: they are your adoptive children. They are the image of God and we are called to restore them to their original shape. Let us respect their habits, have comprehension for their defects and true love for their material and spiritual welfare....", (Circular Letter N° 2, 5-11-1952, *DAK* - File 10).
"... Let us love all as our own children, understanding their mistakes, being patient, looking for them like the Good Shepherd, avoiding negative judgements, not giving in to discomfort: putting up with everything, believing in everything, hoping in everything! ....." (Circular Letter N° 4, 25-3-1953, *DAK* - File 10).

10 Ibid.

11 ".... I take leave from you, reminding you that we are not here for a common priestly ministry but to perform the '*Plantatio Ecclesiae*'. Everything must be directed to this purpose....." (A. Dagnino to All the Xaverians of Jessore, 7-6-1956, *DAK* - File 34).

12 Annual Meeting 1958, *DAK* - 'Convegni Annuali'/File s.n.

13 "...The usual expressions about the inconsistency and the arrogant pride of the people do not explain everything, so they are not convincing....We cannot rest peacefully until we have our native Clergy..." (Circular Letter N° 12, 19-8-1954, *DAK* - File 10).

means had compelled the missionaries to care for their particular stations, the Bishop hoped to establish a more direct control over local economic matters. This failing, he resorted to transferring the missionaries from one residence to another, leading to an excessive mobility of personnel, which resulted in instability and, most of all, in a discontinuity of presence, with detrimental results for the Christians. Moreover, economic difficulties were on the increase: the General Direction was not supporting its missionaries,[14] a request to Rome to increase their annual subsidy was refused,[15] and the canonic visit of a representative of the General Direction did nothing to solve the crisis.[16] Although expressing appreciation for his missionaries,[17] on that occasion Battaglierin felt abandoned by the Institute at a very crucial time[18] when everything was dominated by the spectre of poverty and inadequacy. He was unable to accept new missionaries,[19] the number of catechists had to be halved, restrictions were applied to building constructions, and missionary zeal was undermined.[20] The Bishop lamented the lack of unity among missionaries,[21] the situation of the Catechists, who felt spiritually abandoned, the number of marriages thoughtlessly carried out, deficiency of catechetic instruction, and lack of material contributions from the faithful to the mission. He was also compelled to publish canonic sanctions against his missionaries in connection with the abuse of the USA gifts.[22] Such drastic action seems to have been justified in the Bishop's judgement, reported to the Pope, of his missionaries' attitude: "...Obedience is at times proving very difficult for them....".[23]

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14 The Papal Internuncio, Archbishop of Karachi, who visited the mission on April 1958: "is surprised that the Xaverian Congregation does not support their confrères [in the mission field] financially" (*Chronicle*, 11 April 1958: 143).

15 "... Our biggest problem at the moment is the difficult economic situation which is slowing us down. I feel compelled to notify this impossible situation to you and humbly ask for an increase in the usual subsidy granted to us....." (Battaglierin to Fumasoni-Biondi, Card. Prefect of SCPF, Annual Report 1958-59, 6-10-1959, *DAK* - File 2).

16 On that occasion the missionaries were accused of not following the Bishop's directives, misusing the gifts received from the USA, and were warned not to ask for money from donors of the Xaverians in Italy: ".... What must be avoided is, above all, an indiscreet insistence (for money) and tales of false motives which alter reality, but which are very effective in eliciting compassion from the donors....." (Conference of Fr. Mainini at the end of His Canonic Visit to the Mission, 19-12-1959, *DAK* - File 34).

17 ".... During this period of exceptional economic distress, I certainly understand your real difficulties and admire your perseverance. I am looking for help through humiliations and refusals..... If you work with rectitude and discipline, the Lord will not abandon you....." (Circular Letter N° 24, 2-7-1959, *DAK* - File 10).

18 Battaglierin to Mainini, 27-2-1960, *DAK* - File 35.

19 " The Congregation is ready to send new missionaries to the field, but the diocese is not, at present, in a condition to accept them since it cannot keep them" (Battaglierin: Report on the Diocese of Khulna (30-6-1960) for the Visit *Ad Limina*, *DAK* - File 2).

20 " The lack of funds keeps the recently created diocese in a state of weakness which is reflected also in the missionaries' zeal, who are often prevented by financial need from starting new apostolic activities, or enlarging those already existing. More than half of the villages where we have Christians are at present without a catechist!" (Battaglierin: Report on the Diocese of Khulna (30-6-1960) for the Visit Ad Limina, *DAK* - File 2).

21 " Some Christians contacted me when the missionary was not present, or through letters they wrote to me, expressing their disapproval at the differences of opinion among us. Their judgement has been extremely negative...."(Annual Diocesan Meeting 1960, Khulna, 11-13 May, *DAK* - 'Convegni Annuali'/ File s.n.).

22 *Chronicle*: 179-181. Cfr. 'Notification' N° 59, 26-10-1960. (cf. 'Notification' N° 56, 29-6-1960, *DAK* - File 10).

23 Battaglierin: Report on the Diocese of Khulna (30-6-1960), *DAK* - File 2.

The decade concluded with the celebration in 1961 of a Diocesan Synod,[24] whose spirit was based upon the ideal of missionary activity (*'Plantatio Ecclesiae'*) prior to Vatican II.[25] The idea of 'service', which was to develop later, was already present in missionary mentality, but, at this point, apart from paying lip-service to the study of Bengali language (§ 17), and the limited use of Bengali during the liturgy (§ 96/192), it was reduced to giving, dispensing, promoting and building. Missionary preoccupation with 'giving' was so excessive, that they rarely thought it possible to 'receive' anything from 'their Bengali brothers'. In consequence, they never had enough: money was always short for something new to do, to build or to buy. The Synod came at a time of change within the whole Church since only a few years later saw the start of Vatican II. It thus represented the last moments of an ideal without a future.[26] The following year, on 3rd January 1962, the missionaries celebrated the 10th formal anniversary of the creation of the Jessore Diocese.

The Xaverians and the Rishi (1952-1962)

Soon after their arrival, the Xaverians started to single out the Rishi[27] as a special group within the territory. The Rishi, previously categorised as 'different' by former missionaries, were approached as such by the Xaverians who like the rest of society, considered them a race set apart because of their "impurities", bad habits and 'untouchability'.[28] Nevertheless, this 'difference' was also what moved the Rishi to turn towards Christianity and seek help from the missionaries.

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24 *I[a] Synodus Kulnensis*, Khulna -Pakistan, 1961. The Synodal Constitutions, promulgated in the Cathedral of Khulna during 23-24-25 of May, 1961, were printed in Parma (Italy) on 23rd September, 1961. They were to become law on the Ist of January 1962.

25 As the Constitutions themselves state in art. 82, when discussing local vocations, the missionaries first and most important activity is that of giving "to our brothers of this region, their Priests and their churches".

26 While the Synod's effort reflected an ideal and a model, the missionaries knew the reality to be different and despite many achievements they were still conscious of their own 'poverty' and limitations. Though recognising that "the first and most fruitful preaching that the missionaries can dispense is through their own lives" (art. 10), the Synodal Constitutions make it very clear that "the missionary is sent to teach" (*Missionarius missus est ut doceat* - art. 220), because "the Missionary is sent primarily to bring the light of the Gospel to those who are in darkness" (art. 245).
Some of the 11 Appendices published at the end of the Synodal Constitutions give a picture of the Xaverian activity to date. Thirty-six Xaverians had entered East Pakistan since 1952 [6 in 1952, 7 in 1953, 1 in 1954, 6 in 1955, 2 in 1956, 2 in 1958, 8 in 1959, 2 in 1960, 2 in 1961] leaving a total presence in the mission field, as at 30 June 1961, of 28: 1 Bishop, 20 Priests and 5 Brothers. Of the remaining 8, 1 died (1960), and 7 had been repatriated .

27 Circular Letter N° 13, Jessore 15-3-1955, *DAK* - File 10.
On the occasion of the Centenary Celebration of the Mission, the Xaverians decided to prepare a special issue of their Italian magazine *'Fede e Civiltà'*, and among other topics proposed for publication, Fr. Chiofi was to write about 'the Muci'. Even though he did not in fact write on the subject on that occasion, the Rishi were the only group who appeared as such in the description of the mission.

28 When, for instance, it was proposed to transfer the Simulia orphanage to Khulna, Mgr. Battaglierin agreed with the suggestion made by a Salesian father: "Fr. De Caroli makes the appropriate observation that the children of that low caste [Rishi] should number only a few (in the orphanage), so that they will be absorbed by the others and will get on in life. Otherwise we will start with "dishonour" and our enterprise will develop with difficulty....". *Chronicle*:: 22 (20 Oct. 1952).

As in previous periods, 'conversions' were mainly registered among the Rishi,[29] as testified to by the presence of 300 Satkhira Catechumens, out of 365 in the entire Diocese in 1953.[30] The General Superior, Fr. Gazza, visiting the mission in 1956, confirmed the Rishis' "moment of grace", reporting that they had turned to Christianity "... if only to be protected by the Catholic priest against all the vexations they receive from every side".[31] Apparently, the Protestants were not interested in this "lowest group" and the Police were grateful to the Catholics for elevating them.[32] Fr. Gazza made a point of praising the work of the Jesuits[33] and describing the warm-hearted welcome he received in Baradal.[34]

During this period, Fr. Chiofi was certainly the missionary who, more than any other, had tried to 'understand' the Rishi, gaining an insight into their situation with the help of Fr. Koster. His report, 'Among the Depressed Classes of Bengal',[35] indicates at least a desire to know the socio-economic background of the Christians and their situation of 'Untouchability'. His humanitarian concern for the Rishi, based on his Christian faith and mentality, prevented him from understanding other Hindus: 'caste' was seen as a burden, not only for Hinduism, but also for preventing conversions to Christianity, and 'Untouchability' as an evil, even though through it missionary success was possible.[36]

The report begins with a general description of the situation of 'Untouchables' after which he introduces the 'Muchi of Satkhira Sub-Division' as part of the 25,000 Rishi found in the Khulna

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29 Battaglierin to G. Gazza, 14-8-1954, *DAK* - File 35.

30 Battaglierin, Report to G. Gazza, Sup. Gen., 18-7-1953, *DAK* - File 35.

31 Report of Fr. Gazza's (Gen. Sup.) visit to the Jessore Diocese, 17-3-1956, *DAK* - File 35.

32 ".... The Christians here are very poor, and here too they belong to the lowest caste ('Muchi'); for this reason the Protestants do not come here. ... The Police are grateful to the Missionaries who by preaching the Gospel instruct and elevate those who belong to this caste..." (Ibid.).

33 " Fr. Mesaric was the first missionary to establish himself here. He was a holy man who chose St. Andrew Bobola as patron saint of this mission because he was both canonised during that period and was unknown, being thus appropriate to represent this lowest caste of skinners".
Writing about Fr. Koster, he continues: "... Fr. Henry Koster, s.j., can be considered the real founder of the Mission. He resided here from 1939 until 1953, showing love and intelligence in his work. Before becoming Jesuit he was a representative of an international Dutch firm of textiles in Calcutta. In Satkhira mission he put into practice his talents as a business man to serve the mission which he endowed with many plots of land which will reap future benefits ..... In a word, he was a well-balanced man with practical sense, and a big heart....." (Ibid.).

34 Even though the Christians were extremely poor, they offered him many gifts, including 71 flower garlands, and he also had the pleasure of baptising a seventy year old man there. (Circular Letter N° 18, 1-5-1956, *DAK* - File 10).

35 This was presented at the 1958 'Annual Xaverian Meeting' (*DAK* - File 'Convegni Annuali', s.n.).

36 Being more practical than theoretical, Fr. Chiofi was aware that caste divisions in Bengal were not as rigid as in South India: ".... Without any doubt the Bengali people are not very rigid in the observance of these prescriptions, as the peoples of South India, on the contrary, are. For instance in Bengal there are no groups which contaminate others by their simple presence or touch. In no place are the members of a low caste excluded from public roads due to their caste. In very few places are the sweepers not permitted to use public wells. But also in these cases, modern times have changed things and the pharisaic distinctions have undergone a great decrease....." (Ibid.).

District, and describes their movement towards Christianity.[37] Fr. Chiofi's interest in the early history of the Rishi mission was a serious attempt matched only recently by other Xaverians operating in the same environment, and despite the inaccuracy of some details, his historical account is fairly precise and provides many insights into the missionary attempts made by the Jesuits[38]

As others in the past, Fr. Chiofi recognised that missionary success in East Pakistan could only be achieved among the Rishi[39] since neither the Muslim majority, for obvious socio-political implications, nor the caste Hindus were open to accepting Christianity. The reasons which led the Rishi to become Christians were well-known to Fr. Chiofi: the progress of the old Christian villages, protection, education and financial help. This was perhaps natural, given their disastrous economic situation[40] which, in Fr. Chiofi's view, went hand in hand with the Rishi's mentality "so different from ours, a terribly low, difficult and suspicious mentality....". The civilising role of the missionary was meant to transform these 'different Others', making them "human beings.... by trying to solve their economic problems.... removing illiteracy... giving them a sense of human dignity .... and only then making them Christians".

The model for 'humanity' proposed by the missionary was closer to a western ideal of man than to a Bengali one, even though he was searching for an integration of the Rishi with the rest of society. The ambiguous position of, on the one hand, 'converting' people to Christianity and, on the other, hoping for greater participation in society through education and social uplift, was not recognised by the missionaries at this time. By converting to Christianity the Rishi were moving from one minority group into another, economic advantage being the only apparent difference, and it was this which most probably attracted them to Christianity. The missionaries, on the other hand, were seeking an integration between spiritual and material welfare, closer to the Rishis' own understanding of humanity,[41] and both were in need of each other to reach their goals, since for both groups human dignity and religion were less divided than might appear, as revealed in Fr. Chiofi's conclusion, where all these elements were linked together, not least the need for money.[42]

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37 Fr. Chiofi rightly challenged this calculation found in official reports, "since, taking into account the Muchi villages located to the North and South of Satkhira, they should number at least 50,000 ".

38 At the end of the 'first Mission', around 1927, "... according to trustworthy information [Fr. Koster?] more than 5.000 Muchi gave their name as catechumens. Only a limited number, however, received baptism....".

39 " They show much hope, because they themselves come forward. Entire villages. I think their time of grace has come!".

40 " People without a real job on their hands, or at least, one which is poorly remunerated. Unwillingness to learn a new trade and, generally, to work. Few of them have land.....".

41 "....We should not be in a hurry to baptise. If they are completely new villages, they should wait for no less than a year. It is necessary that the adults learn at least the essentials: the examination must be accurate. If someone is made to repeat the exam, it will be an effective measure....." (Ibid.).

42 "... As a conclusion to this talk, I think we should answer the sorrowful appeal of these poor destitute people with all our strength and potential.

The Bishop, however, reacted by dismissing the issue, at least on that occasion, in a single sentence: "Unfortunately the problem is related to the availability of means and personnel".[43] Meanwhile, many resources, if not personnel, had been directed to support the foundation of the Diocesan Sisters in Simulia, which resulted in failure. Despite all the set-backs, the first decade of the Xaverians in Khulna closed with the conversion of an entire group of 57 Rishi who, on 29th January, 1962, were baptised by the Bishop at Kalinagar, near to the Shehalabunia mission, to which they had moved from Baradal, Goruikhali and Keargati.[44]

SIMULIA 1952-62

Upon the Salesians' departure, Fr. Dalla Valle drew up a programme for the social and spiritual uplift of his community "providing an environment in which they can live with dignity. ... so that they do not feel slaves."[45] The example and collaboration of some was to favour the return of others, particularly from the outstations where one "could not distinguish the Christians from the pagans."[46] Fr. Dalla Valle therefore proposed to extend the period of catechumate to four years so as to stop the Rishis' "going back and forth" and urged a clear commitment at baptism.[47] Whilst his activity in the outstations was disrupted by continuous quarrels and *bicars*, at Simulia centre the Christians invited the *kabiraj* to exorcise devil possession and performed Hindu *jattras* (*SIM. 2*: 172-3). Much upheaval was apparently created by the *matabbars*, seeking to recover their share of power lost to the missionary, and solutions were only partial and temporary, despite the missionary's optimism (*SIM. 2*: 176/183), given that both sides were resolute in pursuing their ends. Fr. Dalla Valle wanted to 'educate' his Christians to

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1) because they constitute our legacy;
2) because this seems the time of grace for them;
3) because they are real missionary field, and a virgin one.
More concretely, however, and, as we say, 'to look reality in the face', we must understand that to face this problem, in addition to zeal, prayer and sanctity, etc... lots and lots of money is needed. I hope the Lord will provide!".

43 *Chronicle*: (13 March 1958): 137.

44 29 Jan. 1962: "H.E. baptises 57 catechumens at Kalinagar. This is a new Christian community, formed only by Muchi who work in that Bazaar, which is half an hour from the Chalna village Bazaar. The movement was started and followed by Fr. Seraphin Dalla Vecchia, who also stayed one week in their *para* for immediate preparation. The two Frs. of Shelabunia and a group of acquaintances and relatives from the communities of Shelabunia, Goruikhali, Baradal (with the musical band), and Keargati were also present" (*Chronicle*: 212-13).

45 " In the places where the Christians are numerous we should organise co-operatives for woodwork, bamboo weaving or tanning of hides..." (Dalla Valle to Battaglierin, 22-8-1954, *DAK* - File 27/'Simulia').

46 Dalla Valle to Battaglierin, 12-6-1954, *DAK* - File 27.

47 ".... Before administering baptism at least four years of instruction and Christian life are needed. Defections and comings and goings would thus stop. Many are Christians being badly prepared for baptism and receiving it without clear commitment....." (Dalla Valle to Battaglierin, 22-8-1954, *DAK* - File 27/'Simulia').

contribute to their own welfare, paying a fee for the mission land on which they lived[48] or working in exchange for 'USA gifts' distribution. The 'food-for-work' programmes carried out in Simulia, where the Rishi worked side by side with Muslims and Hindus building the road to Beniali,[49] together with the projects in the outstations, awakened the fervour of both Christians and former Christians, who were asking to return (*SIM. 2*: 236/238/239/241). The "miracles worked by the rice" and other gifts were, however, destined to last only as long as the rice lasted. The *matabbars*, in fact, aggrieved by finding themselves excluded from any decision-making and profit,[50] took advantage of the situation to "incite the Catholics against the father", by returning to old practices or inviting the Jessore Pentecostals among them.[51] This process had escalated from the time when Fr. Dalla Valle entrusted Fr. Dri, his assistant from May 1955, with the outstations while he concentrated on the foundation of the Annunciation Diocesan Sisters.[52] This enterprise drained him of money and energy creating tensions between him, his community and confrères. The latter in fact, had opposed it fiercely on the grounds that while entire communities had been abandoned due to lack of means and catechists, the Bishop and Fr. Dalla Valle seemed determined to proceed with their project. The final blow came on the occasion of the 'Special Mission', when not only did the headmen encourage a Protestant presence in the southern area,[53] but also at Beniali,[54] and two young men brought Protestant girls to Simulia. At the beginning of 1958, when the *matabbars* organised a meeting to remove the parish priest,[55] and some Protestant catechists visited the Christian *para* distributing pamphlets and bibles, the Bishop had no alternative but reluctantly to replace Fr. Dalla Valle with Fr. Chiofi from Satkhira. The former moved to Jessore together with the nuns, taking from Simulia as much as he could, thus emulating the

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48 "...This is a rightful suggestion, otherwise we form occasional Christians, which means that they are fervent Christians only when they receive something, and otherwise they are not. Furthermore, this is meant to encourage them to collaborate, since in this they are reticent, and do not move a finger to help the mission" (*SIM 2*: 215/231).

49 22 Oct. 1956: "....200 workers in shifts of ten for six hour periods work in the road for 2 *ser* of rice a day.....". 6 Nov. "....During these days around 250 people are working on the road. More than a hundred are Christians, almost a hundred Muslims and the rest Hindus..." (*SIM. 2*: 239-40).

50 " Obviously the headmen had seen in the distribution of clothes some business prospects and a good source of income. But rather than giving the clothes for nothing to the Christians, - who are opposed to making any kind of contribution insisting that the clothes arrived only for them - it is better to give them to the pagans..." (*SIM. 2*: 231).

51 Odhin, the Ulusi Catholic headman, "has found the right moment to move in (no rice, no jobs, and everybody hungry), and to incite our Catholics against the Father...." (*SIM 2*: 271).

52 Permission from Rome to found the local Congregation arrived on July 1955, and Mgr. Battaglierin promulgated the decree on September 8.

53 "....Fr. Dri to Jogodanandakati.....The Christians have written a letter to Odhin to become Protestants. After mass the men moan for many things.... those same old things the father heard in other villages. He tried to explain but they leave unsatisfied....." (*SIM. 2*: 274).
"..... Fr. Dri goes to visit the Christianities of the South. The Protestants are expanding their presence ever more: they sent six catechists to some new villages..." (*SIM.2*: 277).

54 " Yesterday at Beniali the headmen prohibited the Christians from celebrating their liturgy, laying down four conditions to the Fathers; if these are not fulfilled they will pass to another *Dharma*" (*SAT. 2*: 276).

55 Dri to Veronesi, 18-1-1958, *XAK* - File V 23.

Salesians he so despised in the past for the same attitude. Thus Fr. Dalla Valle's initial programmes crumbled under the impact of events and his good intentions of aiding the Christians' social and spiritual growth came to nothing. All in all, it seems clear that the ' message of salvation' travels by very human means, or in 'earthen vessels', conditioning dialogue to the 'intentionality' of the people involved in it.

Taking charge of Simulia, in April 1958, Fr. Chiofi needed time to restore both the confidence of his Christians, still enraged against their former priest,[56] and the deplorable economic situation of the parish (*SIM.2*: 287). His petition to the Bishop to reimburse Simulia for damages remained practically unanswered,[57] and he was told 'to forgive and forget'.[58] Both Fr. Villa, the new assistant at Simulia, and Fr. Dri expressed their disagreement[59] of the way in which matters had been conducted. While money had been spent profusely on the nuns' foundation, they were struggling to keep their communities going, and this was judged as a misappropriation and an error of strategy in missionary policy.

Despite these setbacks, a slow but progressive reconstruction was noticeable thereafter in Simulia and those who had invited the Protestants began negotiating their return into the Catholic fold.[60] Fr. Chiofi, eager to re-establish contacts, called the yearly meeting of *matabbars* and entrusted them with the preparation of the forthcoming Pastoral Visit of the Bishop in their villages: this was a success, together with the celebration for the first time in Simulia centre of First Communions and Confirmations for the whole parish (March 1960). Other tangible signs of missionary commitment had been the gift of land to those who moved to Simulia from the outstations and the building of *pakka* chapels in Noapara and Bodkhana. It seems that Fr. Chiofi understood the importance of building among his Christians a permanent place of worship, to be used also as a village school, even when he lamented their lack of faith and the poor economic situation of the mission. It was one step further towards building up self-esteem in these Rishi, who had never been able to afford the presence of a temple in their midst, and it stood as a sign that God, and the missionaries, were not just passing by, but remaining among them.[61]

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56 The Christians accused Fr. Dalla Valle of misappropriating the money of a *canda* collected by the workers of the Simulia-Beniali road for the poor of the parish, of selling rice at black market prices during famine period, and fining the Christians when they sold rice to outsiders (*SIM. 2*: 229).

57 Chiofi to Battaglierin, 26-5-1958, *DAK* - File 27; Chiofi to Battaglierin, 4-4-1959 (1st), *DAK* - File 27.

58 Battaglierin to Chiofi, Aril 1959, *DAK* - File 27.

59 Dri to Battaglierin, 21-4-1959, *DAK* - File 29; VILLA to Veronesi, 14-1-1959, *XAK* - File V 23/ 'Simulia'.

60 Chiofi to Battaglierin, 4-4-1959 (2nd), *DAK* - File 27.
Battaglierin to Chiofi, 9-4-1959, *DAK* - File 27.

61 'Cronistoria di Diocesi e Parrocchie', *XAK* - File s.n.

When Fr. Lamanna joined Chiofi, in May 1960, he took charge of the children's school, an activity which yielded unexpected benefits. The participation of Hindu and Muslim children, together with teachers from these two groups, helped enormously to overcome the ghetto mentality of the Christian Rishi and their ostracism by others. The temporary experience of these Christians while working with Hindus and Muslims to build the Simulia-Beniali road, became, with the school, a permanent demonstration of practical interaction with society. It had not been enough to tell their Christian Rishi that they were like 'Others', until these 'Others' had the courage - be it a circumstantial need - to sit and work in the same school alongside them. The experiment carried out in the centre, however, saw no follow-up in the outstations, where to this day the lack of self-esteem in the Rishi is evident.

Overall, this first decade of the Xaverians among the Simulia Rishi was conditioned by the human qualities of its agents. The internal problems of the Xaverians had a long-lasting effect on their activity: the economic situation of the mission had certainly played a significant role during this time, but the way the missionaries coped with it reveals once again that the 'proclaimed Kingdom of God' was often reduced to the little kingdoms created by them. The struggle for power, even for 'spiritual power', subverted a vocation announcing 'salvation' to the Other from supposedly 'pure premises', and turned it into an affirmation of the Self, hence negating the Other and the presence of God's Kingdom. At the same time, the patient restoration of dialogue by Chiofi shows the meaningfulness of personal relations for the Rishi, who, on the occasion of the Parish Priest's feast, "came in unending procession to present their homage and gifts to Fr. Chiofi: a consoling scene, which at least disputes the saying that the Bengalis are not grateful!"[62]

SATKHIRA 1952-1962

The first decade of the Xaverians in Satkhira was characterised by an excessive mobility of personnel, economic difficulties and the unsteadiness of the Rishi Christians. Before returning to Calcutta in January 1954 for good, Fr. Koster patiently introduced Fr. Chiofi to his new mission and the many problems to be faced: failure of crops for three consecutive years, friction between India and Pakistan, increase of rice prices beyond proportion and people with "no trade, no work, no income". Many Hindus were still leaving the country and some Rishi were contemplating the same move "being reduced to extreme destitution."[63] This was particularly felt in Baradal where the Christians were forced

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62 Dri, 'Cronistoria di Diocesi e Parrocchie', 1961 (Simulia), *XAK* - File s.n.

63 Koster to Battaglierin, 11-6-1953, *DAK* - File 29.

to sell their houses to local Muslims,[64] and to revert to living as robbers and cattle poisoners (*SAT. 6*: 95/98).

As soon as Fr. Koster left, Fr. Chiofi was plunged into the activity of running a mission with very few means and many starving Christians. The economic conditions of the country had not improved by 1956: people were still going to India in search of jobs,[65] both in the northern and southern area of the mission unemployment and starvation were rife,[66] and the Army had to step in to control the price of rice. This also conditioned the missionary apostolate since,

> ...to convert souls the grace of the Lord is enough, but to carry out construction work and activities we need money....[67]

Seeking to resolve the impasse in Simulia and despite the Satkhira Christians' appeal, Bishop Battaglierin, in April 1958, transferred Fr. Chiofi to Simulia. The Bishop failed to understand the situation in its totality: in the long run, the discontinuity of an individual missionary presence in a given place was detrimental both to the people and the missionaries. These frequent changes of personnel gave the impression of movement and well-planned reshuffling but they were in fact often a cover-up for poor missionary policy.

Fr. Dri, who replaced Chiofi, remained in Satkhira only until January 1960 when he was appointed as the new religious Superior. The Satkhira experience had been a bitter one for him: "I went to the field to work for the Kingdom of God, not to struggle with superiors and confrères".[68] Fr. Crestani replaced him as Rector of Satkhira (*SAT. 7*: 39) but by the end of June 1962, he too left Satkhira, to be replaced by his assistant Fr. Bello.

The Rishi response to Christianity during this period seemed to follow the ups and downs of missionary means and personnel: following a distribution of rice, many asked to re-enter the fold and those already there showed more devotion (*SAT. 6*:105), though not enough to avoid quarrels and *bicar*. Besides there were recurrent problems with jealousy between catechists, complications with marriages (*SAT. 6*:108), and difficulties with the headmen who wanted to return to Hinduism (*SAT. 6*: 109/111/120-1), or revolted because they did not get permission to perform a Hindu *jattra* (*SAT. 6*:

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64 Koster to Battaglierin, 20-9-1953, *DAK* - File 29.

65 28 April 1956: "Fr. Chiofi goes to Dhandia. Many there, given the disastrous economic conditions of the country, are thinking of going to India..." (*SAT.6*: 152).

66 19 May 1956: "Fr. Chiofi visits the villages in the South: disastrous economic conditions...." (*SAT. 6*: 153).
7/9 July 1956: "Visit to the North: Senergati and Dhandia. Here too starvation and unemployment..." 27-30 July: "....Visit to Goruikhali, Baradal and Buria.... Economic conditions still disastrous....." (*SAT.6*: 156/158).

67 Chiofi to Battaglierin, 3-1-1958, *DAK*/File 29.

68 He himself, however, came to recognise that "if money does not reach Satkhira, the Kingdom of God will come to an end!" (Dri to Gitti, 11-5-1959, *DAK* - File 29).

121/123). Fr. Chiofi's early premonition, ("..... I do not think we can ask much from these people, who have such a strange mentality, so difficult to understand, and who are only now ridding themselves of barbarity: we cannot expect to progress miraculously...."),[69] later became more understanding: "... We cannot expect them to have possessed and understood the meaning of Christianity in 15 years. We need time.....".[70] Hence he was eager to welcome many new and old Rishi villages into the fold, intensifying the creation of schools, also for girls, and dealing with the day-to-day problems of the Rishi Christians: marriage arrangements, quarrels, skinning of cows, celebration of *pujas*, gambling and drinking. By collaborating with his catechists, Fr. Chiofi managed to expose many of the peoples' 'secrets' (*SAT.* 6:152; 7: 1). Nevertheless, his Christians signed a petition to the Bishop to keep him in Satkhira. Their attitude is a reminder of the past and an anticipation of the future: no matter how badly the Christian Rishi treated a missionary or made him suffer, when they realised that he gave himself to them, they were ready to accept him forever, since they themselves, despite their faults and misgivings, felt accepted by him. This love/hate relationship, based on 'give and take', could only reach maturity over time, as in the case of Marietti, Nava, Koster and those who followed their path. This was very much Fr. Chiofi's approach, and despite his 'paternalistic' attitude towards the Rishi Christians,[71] he was practical enough to understand their reasons for 'conversion' and their needs. His growing faith in the Rishi was certainly evident and he was the only one, at that time, who envisaged local Xaverian vocations.[72]

The power struggle between the headmen and the missionary, which came to a head during the free distribution of rice, intensified over the coming years. When Fr. Dri urged the *matabbars* to promote education in the villages, they "turned the discussion aside". The young generation were being offered the chance of an education, always denied to the elders, and this was to open new avenues for the group; in the process, the authority of the elders came under threat, and hence they negotiated the founding of schools with measures to recover their own authority.[73] The *matabbars* never willingly relinquished their power, and "their wish to dominate and to be revered"[74] became even stronger as soon as Fr. Dri was replaced by Fr. Crestani.

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69 Chiofi to Battaglierin, 14-8-1953, *DAK* - File 29.

70 Chiofi to Dagnino, 5-10-1954, *XAK* - File V 24.

71 ".....It is necessary to start everything from scratch. They are like children who need to learn how to live...." (Annual Meeting 1958, 'Among the Depressed Classes of Bengal', *DAK* - File s.n.).

72 Battaglierin to Chiofi, 22-2-1956, *DAK* - File 29.

73 Dri, 'Report of Morol Meeting 5-5-1959, *DAK* - File 29.

74 On account of this, Fr. Dri did not implement his plan to create a committee of *matabbars* on the grounds that "they would be in possession of too much power..." (Ibid.).

When Fr. Crestani took charge,[75] the situation was rapidly deteriorating: the Kushdanga people were adamant in their intention to return to Hinduism since "the father did not keep his word with regard to sending a teacher..." (*SAT. 7*: 43-44); a former Christian pupil of the Satkhira school was about to become Muslim; the Christians of Kharda and Senergati played music at the Hindu *puja*; and those of Satkhira centre were "divided by old stigmas and vendettas" (*SAT. 7*:41/44/46). In distress, the Christians used every means to extort money from the missionary (*SAT. 7*: 44), especially by complicating marriage arrangements.[76] Others, driven by need, "returned Muchi"[77] to sell their daughters, remaining "Christians only at heart!" (*SAT. 7*: 47). The lasting problem for Fr. Crestani was, however, the attitude of his Christians who asked: "what is the advantage of sticking to the Father's religion? (*kono lab nei!*)...".[78] Even those who remained Christians were not fervent; any reason was good enough for them to 'return Muchi' (*SAT. 7*: 53-54), and "nobody was interested in matters concerning God!".[79] Though he was welcomed by the catechumens who needed his protection (*SAT. 7*: 65), those already Catholic threatened to convert to Protestantism, if they were not cared for (*SAT. 7*: 67), and in Goalchator and Senergati they were "returning to the onions of Egypt".[80] In Goalchator, the Father laid down sanctions for those who left the Christian *samaj*, which were no different from those normally applied by the Rishi on similar occasions, thus showing an accommodation to local rules, and a clear intention to 'vernacularise' Christianity.[81] Despite these measures, the missionary's 'paternal role' was differently understood by the Rishi themselves, and the missionary was not unaware of this,[82] especially when peace reigned among the Rishi communities (*SAT. 7*: 98): "... In the villages everything is relatively calm, even though there is always that chance that, at the slightest sign of gain, they will abandon their very feeble faith..." (*SAT. 7*: 93). If in the villages the Christians had been causing many problems,[83] in the Satkhira centre things were no better:

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75 *Chronicle*: 169 (6 February 1960).

76 10 April 1960: " Kharda..... marriage problems..... It seems that all these manoeuvres are only directed at getting more money from the Father...." (*SAT. 7*:45; Cf. *SAT. 7*: 52).

77 The missionaries used this expression to refer to the Rishis' abandonment of Christianity.

78 Crestani to Battaglierin, 19-6-1960, *DAKI* File 29.

79 July 1960: "Goalchator: out of 100 Christians only 25 children and adults go to church...." (*SAT. 7*:55).

80 11 Feb.. 1961: "... During the night Soshi Master arrives saying that the defection of Goalchator had been arranged by some Morol as a first step to a collective defection... It seems that in Senergati other families, apostatising, return Muchi!" (*SAT. 7*: 75).

81 5 Feb.. 1961: ".... Fr. Crestani to Goalchator where he has an unwelcome surprise: 5 families -25 souls- have became Muchi again....After mass, a meeting to decide the sanction to be taken: they will be excluded from the *samaj*, they cannot use the *pukur*, visit the Christian families, smoke the pipe together. Having reached this agreement they are called '*ad pedes*' " (*SAT. 7*: 75).

82 " Their conversion had been nothing but a swindle and a tragic and mocking farce.....how superficial, phoney and selfish the weak faith of these poor grown-up children is!" (*SAT. 7*: 94/95).

they had been quarrelling with the local Muslims (*SAT. 7*: 90), and also among themselves, displaying their faults before the non-Christians.[84] Even the prospect of new conversions among the Rishi was becoming problematic, as Fr. Crestani discovered, back in February 1961, when he visited a big Rishi *para* in the Tala area (*SAT. 7*: 75), and commented "the price for their conversion is very high!".[85] He was not referring, however, only to the money which he did not possess, but also to the tenuous nature of such conversions. At this point, the missionary was preoccupied with raising the standards of acceptance for those wanting to become Christians and was concentrating on the Rishis' purity of intention. Contrary to the former obsession with 'saving souls', he seemed afraid of perpetuating the ambiguous situation already evident among his Christians who were 'returning Muchi',[86] and he had to appeal to his faith to justify his activity:

> .... It is clear that we cannot be in a hurry or spend too much money! When there is an interest in another place they will rush there..... Either we become crazy with love like St. Francis and Charles De Foucauld, or we will lose heart. There is no half measure! We find no human attraction to justify and compensate for the sacrifice of our life which is being spent here little by little....(*SAT. 7*: 110)

Since the majority of the problems had been created by the headmen, Fr. Crestani thought of focusing his attention on them. The 1962 annual *Morols* Meeting was intended to recall the headmen's duties within the Christian community,[87] but its positive outcome could not hide the missionary's difficult relationship with the leaders:

> Proof again that the *Morols* are the worst devils, and more skilled than others, only because they arrogantly assume authority! Some of them are causing trouble by marrying young girls. It is indeed nauseating: some of them talk, fitting to the occasion, like Holy Fathers, but work like devils with nothing but their dirty interests in mind .... On the other hand, we cannot do without them, because everyone else is either stupid or dominated by them.....[88]

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83 4 May 1961: "....While Joseph Pande was in Satkhira, the principal Christians of Senergati gambled a great deal. Sagdah: a new apostate: Dhiren Biswas marries her daughter Dashi, who is 11, to a Muchi... The catechumens of Roghunatpur send the catechist back: "We do not need him any more, leave us alone!" They have been influenced by the Morol Chonu, Mono and Amullo. At Goalchator, Binod Mandol marries his son, 12, with Moyna Mandol, 3 years old, from Bishonath! ..." (*SAT. 7*: 84).

84 Crestani to Battaglierin, 10-5-1961, *DAK*/ File 29.

85 Crestani to Battaglierin, Christmas 1961, *DAK* - File 29.

86 24 Dec. 1961: "....To Goalchator for the mass. .... All the people attended the preparation of the *jattra*. Only 13 communions. The hurt was so strong that the Fr. did not preach and after supper, at 9 p.m., rushed away. Never before was so much ill-will witnessed! The head Morols repeat continually that they will return Muchi ...." (*SAT. 7*: 110).

87 2 Feb. 1962: "Catechists' meeting..... Preparation of the Morol annual meeting to be held on 11-12 March, with the following agenda:
1) Faithfulness to our Religion against all odds (Parish Priest)
2) Duty of the Morol to co-operate with the Catechist (J. Pande)
3) Duty of the Morol to correct superstitions: a) to play at the *puja*, *mantra* and *maduli*; eating meat of dead animals, and spirits/ghosts. b) Financial pressure {pressioni monetarie - pressure to get money from the Fr.? }; quarrels; nudism; seclusion of wives; marriage arrangements for children (Pitor Mandol)
4) Duty of the Morol with regard to education and religious instruction (Daniel Gain)
5) Need for the Morol to build up a good personality. (Barnabas and Louis Biswas)....." (*SAT. 7*: 114).

88 Crestani to Battaglierin, 14-3-1962, *DAK* - File 29.

BARADAL 1952-1963

Following their return to Baradal in April 1937 (*SAT. 2*: 36), the Jesuits decided to reside in Satkhira but always felt a particular concern for the large Baradal community. Many Christians had moved to Satkhira town and other areas and, soon after their arrival, the Xaverians decided to station there a resident missionary. By the end of the 'Special Mission' preached in Baradal during December 1957, circumstances were favourable and on that occasion, Bishop Battaglierin administered confirmation to 65 Christians and announced the erection of the Baradal Rectory, appointing Fr. Seraphin Dalla Vecchia as Rector (*SAT. 7*: 4).[89] Fr. Seraphin had already moved, in May of that year, to Satkhira as Fr. Chiofi's helper (*SAT. 6*: 170), and had started visiting the southern area, quickly discovering the 'hot temperament' of his future flock, enraged against the parish priest.[90] Further visits revealed the presence of many Rishi[91] and some Namasudra[92] ready for conversion. When he asked the Bishop for an engine for his boat, in order to reach the area more easily, Fr. Seraphin made a remark which was to characterise his whole project among the Rishi: "....Certainly things are not as simple as they might appear, but I am very hopeful.....". In fact, his first day of residence in Baradal[93] was disrupted by the Christians with preparations for a Christmas *jattra*. He soon realised that "problems existed previously and will continue to exist....",[94] although a month later, they seemed to him less threatening.[95]

A permanent missionary presence in Baradal was soon opposed by Hindus and Muslims[96] who saw in this not only increased mission power, but also a loss of control over the Rishi. Particular

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89 Fr. Dalla Vecchia arrived in Jessore on 30 December, 1956 (*Chronicle*: 115).

90 "At Baradal, the people are against the catechist and moan about the *Bara* Father (Chiofi), because of the American rice. As a protest this morning, feast of Corpus Christi, nobody attended Mass....." (*SAT. 6*: 172 - 20 June 1957).

91 ".... During this last period I found myself in a terrible growth crisis. Around Bistopur, where with your help I have built the chapel, there lie a great number of 'shoemaker' villages who wish to be converted. ...." (Dalla Vecchia to Battaglierin, 26-7-1957, *DAK* - File 33 'Baradal'). Fr. Seraphin uses here the expression '*Scarpari*' meaning 'shoemakers' to address the Rishi. This Italian 'paraphrase' appears often in the missionaries' letters and colloquial expressions, probably to avoid the term 'Muchi', despised by the Rishi themselves, and used by others in a derogatory sense.

92 ".... If I manage to make a break within another caste a new era will start for this area. This will be the salvation of our 'shoemakers'!" (Dalla Vecchia to Battaglierin, 26-7-1957, *DAK* - File 33 'Baradal').
"....There is also an important Hindu (Namasudra), who worked with Pitor Gomes, who seems well disposed towards us. All the Hindus of the area are in his hands. Everybody says: "If he becomes Christian, we cannot but follow him"....." (Ibid.).

93 "...His dwelling made of fragile bamboo walls and thatch was similar to those of his people... Thus he used to sign his letters : 'the son of the hut'...." (Garello, *Cento Villaggi per Serafino*, n.d.: 36).

94 Dalla Vecchia to Battaglierin, 29-12-1957, *DAK* - File 33.

95 "...My problems of the first days are over, and I have understood that it is not worth attaching too much importance to these any more....." (Ibid.).

96 "Fr. Chiofi goes urgently to Baradal, ... There has been a big disturbance (*maramari*), between Christians and Hindus over the land near Buria .... The envy of Muslims and Hindus was at the origin of it. ... " (*SAT. 7*: 7 - 9 Feb. 1958).

complications with the Muslims arose when a Muslim family demanded the return of a girl who, during the famine period of 1950, had been adopted by a Rishi family and Fr. Seraphin decided to return her, since "there were many influential Muslims backing the whole stratagem".[97]

Major difficulties, however, originated within the community and the delight at seeing "many old Christian villages asking to come back" was accompanied by recurring problems: the headmen, feeling entitled to free meals after regularising marriage, were opposed by the missionary on the grounds that these celebrations followed the laws of the Church and not those of the *samaj*.[98] Though the headmen sought a free meal whenever possible, the missionary failed to see that these leaders' authority was under threat and the controversy was not limited to the 'arrangement' of marriages, but extended to an area of power which the headmen did not want to surrender. Hence, though showing external approval for the missionaries' decisions, they created as many obstacles as possible for the implementation of Catholic ethics. As it happened, a young man from Baradal married a Protestant girl (ex-Namasudra) from the Baniarchok (Faridpur) area, and Fr. Seraphin opposed the regularisation of the marriage.[99] He understood that a solitary Rishi 'conversion' was not enough, since the real solution to the Rishi ghetto would only come when other groups in the area accepted Christianity. However, despite his hopes of converting the Baradal Namasudra,[100] nothing came of it. The Rishi, for their part, being ostracised by the other Khulna Catholics, found a temporary solution by marrying with the Protestant ex-Namasudra of distant areas.

The main preoccupation of Fr. Seraphin during this time was not only 'converting or re-converting' the Rishi attracted by his generosity (*SAT.* 7: 33), but also of helping them to find the means to earn a living. He was well-known among the other missionaries for always being without money, for he gave freely to the poorest among them, as in the case of Alamtalla village from where many families had already fled to escape hunger.[101] He received approval to build the Fathers' residence in Baradal, together with a chapel and a house for the catechist, but with it no financial support,[102] and money was also

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97 Dalla Vecchia to Battaglierin, 7-5-1958, *DAK* - File 33.

98 " I explained my reasons and they accepted calmly. For ordinary marriages I am the first to respect their customs, but when I am called to repair something broken, the Church's laws must hold more value. It seems they have understood....." (Dalla Vecchia to Battaglierin, 29-12-1957, *DAK* - File 33).

99 " I have answered that since they have done as they wanted, they now have to wait.....". (Dalla Vecchia to Battaglierin, 5-4-1958, *DAK* - File 33).

100 "..... There are good hopes among the Namasudra. There is a Babu who studied in Dhaka with Pitor Gomes (Catechist) who asks to become Christian. The news was very much talked about even in the most distant villages. They say that everyone is going to follow him..... I think that for this job your direct intervention is required... If we can do something in this direction we could be opening a door for the future of this mission..." (Dalla Vecchia to Battaglierin, 5-9-1958, *DAK* - File 33).

101 Dri, 'Cronistoria di Diocesi e Parrocchie', 1959, *XAK* - File s.n.

102 "....You can thus undertake these projects using the help (money!) that Providence has provided you with up to now and will provide you with in the future....". (Gitti to Dalla Vecchia, 28-4-1959, *DAK* - File 33).

needed to employ new catechists for the returning villages.[103] The situation saw no improvement, as the laconic chronicle for June 1959 indicates: "There is famine everywhere; many hope to receive the USA gifts. It is pitiful to see them in such conditions!".[104] The annual meeting of the *matabbars* had to be postponed: "... when they are able to eat three times a day, it will be easier to discuss less material problems which are further from their stomach...".[105]

When Fr. Bizzeschi was appointed assistant to Baradal, the Bishop urged Fr. Seraphin to complete the residence and to abandon the hut in which he was living, but money was not sufficient and even the Papal Nuncio, who visited Baradal in February 1960, breakfasted in Fr. Seraphin's hut. When the residence was eventually completed the fathers moved there and the Rishi, who certainly did not expect the missionary to live at their standards, saw this as a sign of prestige in front of others. However, they appreciated the style of this missionary who was not ashamed to live in their midst, eating with them and, above all, suffering with them. In this way he was able to gain a deeper understanding of the expectations of his people, "by assimilating their usages, customs, language and their deepest aspirations, by taking part from an internal standpoint in their liberation".[106] This attitude can be seen now, some years later, as an alternative missionary policy, which was to be adopted by younger missionaries reaching the field: even though these did not share Fr. Seraphin's desire to baptise as many Rishi as possible, they respected his commitment. His superiors, however, were of a different opinion, and while they were ready to accept "adaptation" as a good apostolic method, they did not consider it proper that Fr. Seraphin used to "eat, drink and smoke as any other Bengali!".[107] The continuous lack of money in Baradal provided the Superior with the opportunity to write a strong letter to Fr. Seraphin with regard to his use of money.[108] Fr. Seraphin answered very briefly: ".... I would have preferred a verbal warning where my eating and drinking habits are concerned; I recognise my error in smoking and I have almost completely remedied this... Bless me, so I can convert myself....".[109]

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103 These were the villages of Godarpur and Keargati. The former 'turned Muchi again' after having burned the chapel, some 20 years earlier, and the latter, famous for its robberies, had moved to the Protestants, while waiting for the Catholics. Now they were ready to return and having sent the Protestant teacher away, the Fr. helped them to build the chapel and the house for the catechist (Dri, 'Cronistoria di Diocesi e Parrocchie', 1959, *XAK* - File s.n.)

104 Ibid.

105 Dalla Vecchia to Battaglierin, 10-6-1959, *DAK* - File 33.

106 Garello, *Cento villaggi per Serafino*: 49.

107 Dri to Dalla Vecchia, 28-8-1960.

108 ".... Last time you came to the Domus you asked me for money because you had none. Last week your helper came here and he too asked for money... Now I ask you: How did you spend the money I gave you at the beginning of the trimester? What did you do with it? The money the Religious Superior gives you for food, clothes etc. for the Fathers, must be spent for that, and I forbid you to use it for other purposes...." (Ibid.).

109 Dalla Vecchia to Dri, 30-9-1960, *XAK* - File V 25.

Other external 'signs' complemented a permanent missionary presence in Baradal during this period: the building of a *pakka* church,[110] the intensification of education and the replacement of old temples with Christian symbols. The sign of a village church became common ground in the 'dialogue' between the missionary and the Rishi: for the missionary it was a sign of Christian presence, of conquered territory and a place around which the community met and united. For the Rishi, particularly at this initial stage, it was a visible and tangible sign in front of others that they too, having a place of worship, were human beings, and that God, whatever his origin, was in their midst too. The bigger the sign, the better, and the Baradal church was meant to be big enough to compete with the local mosque and Hindu temples. It did not matter if the Christians, at least from the Rishi point of view, were not very zealous in participating in religious functions: the sign was nevertheless there to be seen. Furthermore, the change from a *kaca* chapel to a *pakka* church, demonstrated also a missionary commitment to make their permanence there more stable and secure. Even though the initial 'intentions' behind the 'sign' were different, this did not prevent the continuation of a certain level of dialogue; the missionary, in fact, was not completely unaware of the Rishis' aspirations and fears, and the Rishi were familiar with missionary expectations. This sort of mutual understanding materialised in the case of marriage agreements, when the *matabbars* were ready to collaborate with the missionary[111] in rectifying the intention of parents. By calling them 'my headmen', Fr. Seraphin was not using a figure of speech, but meant that they were now Christians and under Christian law and, as such, they had to obey the Church, represented by his will. As we shall see, the headmen rarely remained complaisant, especially in marriage matters, and it was for this very reason that he later abandoned Baradal.

Another centre around which dialogue developed was the school for boys and girls. When the Jesuits had started a mission in the past, the very first activity had been to build a chapel/classroom to improve the Rishis' social position and allow them to 'understand' Christian doctrine. The Rishi welcomed the centre, but difficulties had not completely been overcome when Fr. Seraphin started residing in Baradal, since education in itself was no solution to their daily problems. Benefits were obtained, however, as a side-effect of the prestige gained by the school: many local Hindus and Muslims started sending their children to the mission school, and caste Hindu and Muslim teachers were employed. This break-through, similar to the occurrence in Simulia during the same period, was destined to have unexpected results, and what Fr. Seraphin had sought to achieve through the Namasudra's conversion, by breaking the vicious circle of the Rishi's segregation, was in fact being achieved through other channels: a new

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110 On 31 April, 1960, Fr. Seraphin called a general meeting of the whole village: the people had agreed to work for free excavating the land: "... At moonlight, Fr. Seraphin gives the first blow with the pickaxe, and the young men proceed enthusiastically" (Dri, 'Cronistoria di Diocesi e Parrocchie', 1960, *XAK* - File s.n.).

111 A Christian girl was promised to a non-Christian Rishi: ".....My headmen have now managed to arrange her marriage with a young Christian from Bistopur (Chachai). I think we should speed things up to avoid danger for the girl, who is not yet 14....." (Dalla Vecchia to Battaglierin, 11-2-1960, *DAK* - File 33).

generation of Rishi children were sharing the same school bench with the children of their old masters.[112]

In 1961 when the missionaries replaced the Kali temple with a Cross in Alantolla, the Christians were full of apprehension and fear, and left the missionaries to carry out the work alone.[113] This 'replacement activity' reveals that part of 'dialogue' which is expressed more in silence than in words since the missionary knew that among the Rishi "fear always comes to the surface, just like hunger does!".[114] The Rishis' "sigh of relief" after the temple was destroyed was as elusive as their 'pure conversion', since they were not quite sure that this would not cause terrible things to happen. This indicates both the processual character of 'conversion' as well as that of 'dialogue' which was both spoken and unspoken. In the long run this dialogue/silence in which the 'replacement' came about, could not have a 'pure' final result with the Rishi completely accepting the new sign and the missionary happy with the positive outcome. If the Rishi were understandably unwilling or afraid to change their signs and create a split in their social-religious identity, the missionaries themselves were by no means immune from an 'identity crisis'; not because they doubted their own faith, but because they started to 'understand' and interpret in a new and different light the former 'faith' of the Rishi. At this stage, however, this new attitude only took the form of a benevolent missionary paternalism, which was mainly directed to 'understanding', both in the sense of comprehending and 'showing tolerance', towards the Rishi. The outcome, nevertheless, meant a shift in missionary intentionality which became more open to the Rishi seen as a suffering people rather than as 'pagans' to be converted. The Rishi, on the other hand, and despite their 'split identity', knew how to take advantage of the missionary's weakness and 'understanding'.

The intense activity carried out during 1960-62[115] involved great expenditures, and Fr. Seraphin, having spent all the money on his Christians, even that allocated to feed the missionaries, also had debts with the Fathers and Sisters of Satkhira, and with the diocesan administrator. When he started giving large sums of money on loan to the Christians, the Superior intervened to remind him that "money is a dangerous weapon".[116] Furthermore, one of his Christians sent an anonymous letter to the

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112 It is said that Fr. Seraphin, when a local *badralok* asked him not to sit his children close to a 'Muchi', used to answer: "we, at school, apply the most absolute democracy!" (Garello, *Cento villaggi per Serafino*: 41).

113 "..... The Christians did not help to clean the place out and to remove the old temple, because they were afraid. The two Fathers, helped by the Baradal altar-boys, did all the preparations. Only when the planted cross had been blessed did the Christians, sighing with relief, say: 'Now we believe that our old Goddess Kali cannot harm us!' " (Dri, 'Cronistoria di Diocesi e Parrocchie', 1961, *XAK* - File s.n.).

114 Garello, *Cento villaggi per Serafino*: 51.

115 A cyclone devastated the area in May 1961 (*Chronicle*: 196); the Church was inaugurated in July 1961 (*Chronicle*: 201); 57 Rishi from Baradal, Goruikhali and Keargati were baptised in Kalinagar in January 1962 (*Chronicle*: 212-13).

116 Dri to Dalla Vecchia, 17-1-1962, *XAK* - File V 25.

Religious Superior, accusing Fr. Seraphin of selling the American milk "like a thief, since it was meant to be given to us, because we are poor".[117] The crisis precipitated during 1963 was a combination of marriage problems, which had never proved straightforward in Baradal,[118] and accusations against the missionary, by two opposing factions. These intrigues prevented the Bishop's visit to Baradal, lest he was insulted.[119] After the General Superior, Fr. Castelli, visited the mission in April (*Chronicle: 241*), Fr. Seraphin was removed from Baradal on the grounds that the place was unsuitable for a missionary residence,[120] but in May Fr. Spagnolo was sent to replace him(*Chronicle*: 245). The Christians wrote to the Bishop in a last attempt to have Fr. Seraphin back,[121] but the plea remained unanswered and he took up his new work in Satkhira. Only 15 years later was he to return to Baradal to conclude there his missionary life. Prior to this, Fr. Seraphin had experienced many difficulties with his assistant Fr. Bizzeschi[122] who eventually left Baradal for another station.[123] The whole incident discloses the ambiguity and misunderstandings of a fragmented dialogue: while, on the one hand, both missionaries were genuinely preoccupied with transmitting certain values to the Rishi, and hence establishing a dialogue with them, on the other, they were not able to achieve dialogue among themselves.

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117 Dri to Dalla Vecchia, 4-4-1962, *XAK* - File V 25.

118 Earlier in 1961, Fr. Seraphin had written a desperate appeal to the Superior telling him: "The marriage problems have reached extreme proportions. If you want to save me, I pray that you come here soon; I cannot take it any longer..." (Dalla Vecchia to Dri, 3-4-1961, *XAK* - File V 25).

119 Dalla Vecchia to Battaglierin, 16-4-1963, *DAK* - File 33.

120 "Fr. Seraphin was removed from Baradal on the grounds that the place was unsuitable Fr. Seraphin Dalla Vecchia, with a letter from the newly appointed Religious. Sup. Fr. Crestani, presents himself here asking for asylum for an indefinite period. This measure seems to be the result of the visit of the Gen. Sup. to the Baradal mission station. He too [Gen. Sup.] agrees in declaring that residence unsuitable, due to moral dangers.... and because of the lack of peace and quiet which are indispensable for an honest living..." (*SAT. 7*: 141 - 27 April 1963).

121 ".... Why did Your Grace abandon us to our fate? We implore you to free us from these sorrowful days, sending Fr. Seraphin back to us. In two years' time he will go on holiday, so send him back to us now. This is our most urgent plea... ... P.S.: Two main things caused the problems among us: 1) Samuel and Robi are responsible for what happened with the marriage. 2) Kena, the mission cook, stirred things up, making the Fr. believe whatever he liked, provoking all sorts of misunderstandings. We implore you to replace him with another cook....." (Baradal Christians to Battaglierin, n.d. received 28-5-1963, *DAK* - File 33).

122 Bizzeschi to Battaglierin, 5-7-1960, DAK - File 33; Bizzeschi to Dri, 17-12-1960, XAK - File V /25; Bizzeschi to Dri, 8-4-1961, XAK - File V /25.

123 2 Sept. 1960: " ... Fr. Bizzeschi leaves Baradal (without any regret) and comes to stay here in Satkhira...." (SAT. 7: 59).

2. The Second Decade (1962-1972)

The second decade of the Xaverians in Khulna Diocese can only partially be considered as a consolidation of the work previously done because some of the problems, as for example the difficult economic situation, still persisted, and others were to intensify. The tension between the Bishop and the missionaries was to reach dramatic proportions which ended with the Bishop's resignation and the appointment of a new Bengali Bishop. These changes, however, must be examined in the wider framework of greater changes within the whole Church, especially after the celebration of Vatican II. A local hierarchy, whenever possible, was replacing western Bishops in mission territories. In East Pakistan, after the appointment of the Bengali Bishop of Dhaka, the new Bishops of Dinajpur and Chittagong were also chosen from the Bengali clergy, in accordance with the new attitude of Rome favouring the growth of the local Church. Nevertheless, the ideal of "serving" the local Church had to take into account the many years of missionary rule and economic aid which continued to reach the missions after the local Bishops had been appointed, since they still depended on the missionary presence to run their dioceses.

Even greater changes, however, were to occur during this period in East Pakistan: the Indo-Pakistani conflict, which particularly affected our area, was followed by the Independence of the country and the creation of Bangladesh. If, on the one hand, these circumstances disrupted not only missionary activity but life in general, on the other, they gave the missionaries the opportunity to renew their commitment not only to 'serve' the small group of Christians, but the Bangladeshi people at large. As happened at the creation of East Pakistan when many church structures had been considered useful for the new State, so too, with the creation of Bangladesh, the church hospitals, schools, orphanages, dispensaries, co-operatives etc, constituted an asset for the young Nation. Furthermore, many leading Bangladeshi figures had been killed by the Pakistani Army, and the Catholic Hierarchy, particularly Mgr. Ganguli, gave their service to the Nation at a moment when it was most needed. The missionaries, in their turn, participated actively in the liberation of the country, sharing the suffering of the people and acting as mediators for those who became indiscriminate objects of revenge, as in the case of the Biharis and other minorities, when the war ended. One of them, Fr. Veronesi, was killed by the Pakistani Army simply for helping those in need. Reconstruction was as painful as the war itself: the temptation was for the missionaries to transform themselves into development agents when the people were starving and aid money was pouring into the country. The difficult equilibrium between being 'men of God' and 'foreign agents' had often been upset, but it was constantly re-established by means of meetings, discussions and seminars, especially during the late 70's, and well into the next decade.

From missionary sources, it seems that much time and energy were spent by the Xaverians in solving internal frictions, particularly in settling their conflict with the Bishop. Initial differences were apparently never reconciled and lack of co-operation between the Bishop and Fr. Crestani, the new

Religious Superior from April 1963,[1] became intense when the latter sought to defend the missionaries. The intervention of the General Direction was ineffective and while they reproached the missionaries' with lack of discipline,[2] particularly in economic matters, they were unable to find viable solutions. In an exchange of correspondence between the General Direction and Fr. Crestani,[3] the latter expressed dissatisfaction at the ambiguous position of the General Direction in tackling the reality of the Khulna Diocese. He repeatedly lamented the Bishop's "courteous but not loving disposition",[4] his inadequacy at tackling relevant issues, and his general attitude which was "unassertive, fearful, elusive and always seeking the self-preservation of his authority".[5] While the missionaries were working very hard in difficult environmental conditions and in a country which did not give much apostolic satisfaction, they did not need this further burden, and some of them asked either to be recalled to Italy or appointed to another mission, which would have been interpreted as a "missionary fiasco".[6] Furthermore, Fr. Crestani criticised the Bishop's administrative policy which caused much distress among the missionaries and went against the spirit of religious poverty:

> He left it up to everyone to use the money they received as they wanted. In this way, were born the little and big RAJAS.....[7]

To solve this, an envoy of the General Direction resorted to placing all economic matters in the hands of the Bishop and the diocesan governing bodies,[8] but a viable solution was never reached and by April 1969 the Bishop presented his resignation. The news became official in Khulna on April 14th,[9]

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1 While the Bishop was the representative of the Pope to govern the local church, and the sole person responsible for apostolic work and activities, the Religious Superior was the representative of the Institute to which the mission/diocese had been entrusted. He should, in one word, 'watch over' the Xaverians to ensure that the Diocese provided for them 'moral security, spiritual assistance and decent material comfort'.

2 Castelli, speech to the Xaverians in East Pakistan, 23 April 1963, *XAK* - File V1.

3 Garbero to Crestani, 18-7-1964; Crestani to Garbero, 20-8-1964; Crestani to Garbero, 15-10-1964; Garbero to Crestani, 22-10-1964; Crestani to Garbero, 29-10-1964, *XAK* - File V/2.

4 Crestani to Castelli, 1-3-1964, *XAK* - File V 1.

5 Crestani to Castelli, 24-5-1964, *XAK* - File V 1.

6 Garbero to Battaglierin, 18-8-1964, *DAK* - File 35. Some time earlier also the General Superior had expressed this opinion in connection with a missionary who could not find his right place in the mission. Fr. Castelli exhorted the Religious Superior to give him work in an area where he could stay alone: "otherwise in a couple of months there will be another return journey, with subsequent rumours (and Khulna can do without these rumours right now!) of the one who returns, who will certainly not say that he is changing mission because of his own faults...." (Castelli to Crestani, 8-11-1963, *XAK* - File V 1).

7 Crestani to Garbero, 20-8-1964, *XAK* - File V 2.

8 'Report of Fr. Vanzin's Canonic Visit to the mission of Khulna', 5-8-1965, *DAK* - File 35.

9 14 April 1969: "Official news: The Pope has accepted the resignation of Mgr. Battaglierin as Bishop of Khulna and he becomes the titular Bishop of Ploaghe (Sardinia). At the same time, as from yesterday, Mgr. Ganguli has been temporarily appointed Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Khulna. Mgr. Ganguli, in his turn, has appointed Fr. Gitti as his Delegate for the administration of the Diocese" (*Chronicle*: 371).

and a few days later Mgr. Battaglierin, unknown to all, left Khulna to repatriate in what seemed more like flight than departure.[10]

In these circumstances, the missionaries were not encouraged to follow even the positive guidelines of their Bishop who, through circular letters and notifications, had warned them of excessive paternalism towards the Christians, had encouraged them to pay attention to local customs, to value women, and to spend time listening to the Christians.[11] The Bishop's long periods of absence from Khulna, and his replacement by the inadequate and incongruous Vicar General, contributed to an unbearable situation for the missionaries. This was particularly evident during the Indo-Pakistani War (1965) when the missionaries were interned for a period and none of the superiors seemed concerned for their fate; and while the Bishop invited them to proceed "*in spe contra spem*", since ... ".....scarcity of means, reduction of personnel and moral difficulties, should not be an obstacle but a thrust towards greater zeal....",[12] Fr. Crestani was suggesting drastic measures to put an end to their misery.[13]

When Battaglierin finally left, Fr. Luca, an envoy of the General Direction, urged the missionaries to consolidate rather than expand their activity, so as to solve their precarious economic situation.[14] Although individual temperaments played a great role in the disagreements between Battaglierin and the missionaries, diocesan economic policies - or lack of them - were mainly responsible for the final departure of the former Bishop of Khulna. To this end, when the news reached the missionaries that Mgr. M. D'Rozario was appointed as the new Bishop of Khulna, in October 1970, a commission was created to study the situation and foster fund-raising activities (*Chronicle*: 376-381). A terrible cyclone hit the country in November, and soon after the War of Independence started: some missionaries had to leave but others remained to participate in the rebuilding of a shattered country.[15]

The activity of the missionaries among the Rishi during this second decade reflects the general state of the Diocese. The tension which developed between the Bishop and the missionaries certainly had a negative effect on the latter's apostolate. The efforts of the missionaries in carrying out their daily task

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10 17 April: "Unknown to all, Mgr. Battaglierin leaves Khulna definitively for Dacca then to repatriate....."(Ibid.).

11 Battaglierin, Circular Letter N° 29, 3-8-1963, *DAK* - File 10.

12 Battaglierin, Circular Letter N° 32, Christmas Day 1966, *DAK* - File 10.

13 " I still think that the General Superior should be prepared for everything, even to close the Mission, to remove the missionaries or to recall the Bishop, should this be required for a common good..." (Crestani to Gazza, 24-9-1967, *XAK* - File V 3).

14 Luca, 'Pro Memoria to the Frs. Chiofi, Religious Superior, and Crestani, Episcopal delegate, about the relationship between the Xaverians and the new Bishop/Diocese, 11-7-1969, *DAK* - File 35.

15 "The past months have been tragic. The days to come are no less critical. All signs indicate more tempest than quiet. We, however, must be optimistic. Some see it as a rare opportunity for the Church not to be missed. The Diocese of Khulna, even though entrusted to a local Bishop, remains under the responsibility of the Xaverians....." (Guarniero to Gazza, 2-3-1972, *XAK* - File V 3).

were not, however, without results and, in one way or another, the 'dialogue' between them and the Rishi was allowed to continue. The history of this 'dialogue', which at times was very tenuous, can be reconstructed only through the missionaries' correspondence with the Bishop and the Religious Superior, since the missionaries had ceased writing diaries.[16] Moreover, missionary activity was further disrupted first by the Indo-Pakistani conflict of 1965 and later by the Liberation War. In this second case, however, the missionaries had the opportunity of coming into contact with the Bangladeshi people at large and, without abandoning their communities, they opened up to the human reality around them. As a result the missionaries, who had always felt the need to break the Rishis' ghetto, were given one more chance to do so. Although the Rishi did not find themselves any better off after the war, the missionaries working among them were certainly in a more advantageous position to establish a link between them and the rest of society.

SIMULIA 1962-74

The history of Simulia during this decade is clearly divided into two different periods and while the first (1962-66) is characterised by disagreements and tensions both between the missionary in charge, Fr. Lamanna, and the Rishi, and between the missionaries themselves, the second period (1966-74) shows a strong commitment by the missionaries to solving the Rishis' plight. Frs. Veronesi and Cobbe, different both in character and apostolic methods, put aside these differences to welcome the Other, be he Muslim, Hindu or Christian, and even if their results remain questionable, their death is a testimony to their love for the Bangladeshi poor.

When Fr. Lamanna took charge of Simulia, many Christian villages were in turmoil: girls were given in marriage to 'pagan' boys, people would participate in Hindu *Pujas*, the catechists were ineffective in preventing this, and everything was done with the consent and approval of the leaders. Given these circumstances, many were 'returning Muchi'[17] simply by playing at *Pujas*[18] and with the

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16 Only in the case of Satkhira do we have a diary which covers part of this period, up until December 1966.

17 Fr. Lamanna uses the term "*ocki*" to refer to those Christians who became Hindu again; it is either a derogatory name used by the people to address the Rishi (*o ki*? "what is that?"), or a term used by the same Rishi to address those who used to pass from one group to another, losing thus their clear identity. In successive letters the Fr. will also use the Italian '*oche*' (geese) which resembles the Bengali "*o ke*" "who is that?". In either case, the interpretation of a lost identity or of an elusive one seems pertinent (Lamanna to Gitti, July 1962, *DAK* - File 27).

18 "...The people of Noapara have formed a *dal* and every day go to the *Puja*. There is no stopping them. Not even when the Fr. goes there for ministry do they stop. Meanwhile they are passing to the Hindus. The only remedy is to change the catechist. Will we have to wait long?..." (Lamanna to Gitti, 3-10-1962, *DAK* - File 27).

clear intention of establishing marriage alliances outside the Catholic fold,[19] either with the Hindu Rishi or with the Protestants.[20]

These circumstances provided a fertile ground for the village *matabbars* to recover some of their power and for the *bara neta* to become once more a centre of unity for the dissatisfied villages. Occasions such as local elections were used by the *matabbars* to establish alliances with Muslim parties, to whom they would pledge their votes. In Beniali they were contacted by two different Muslim factions and, without revealing their intentions to the people and in strong opposition to the catechist, they promised their votes to both parties in exchange for favours and power. After the election the Muslim losers wanted to destroy the village and only then did the *matabbars* ask the missionary for pardon. Feeling cheated, the Christians themselves asked for a dismissal of the local *matabbars*. The tactic used by the *matabbars* on that occasion was to take advantage of internal missionary divisions by turning to the higher authority of the Bishop, in an attempt to put both Fr. Lamanna and the catechist on trial: if a *bicar* was started, they knew they had won half the battle. Feeling right was on his side, the Father was tempted to accept the challenge, and only the intervention of the Vicar General managed to avoid another "humiliating situation", as in the case of Fr. Dalla Valle.[21]

Solutions were always temporary and greater difficulties overcame minor ones. In fact, whilst in the outstations the Christians were still participating in *pujas*, or acting as *kabiraj*,[22] in Simulia the young men were bringing Protestant brides from Faridpur. Even the intervention of the Muslim Chairman, who accepted bribes from the 'culprits', could not avoid this embarrassment for the missionary. Once back in the *para*, they were usually pardoned and re-admitted into the Church, but the problem was on the increase and the missionary seemed unable to control it. Thus, his last recommendation to the Bishop on how to handle the Simulia case, reflects his desire to put an end to these 'escapades'. Whilst difficulties extended to the outstations where people were returning to 'paganism', those who remained Christians also took advantage of the mission, considering it a 'milking cow'.[23]

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19 " At Bashantapur too there are marriage problems..... one entire family returns to paganism so one of them can marry a pagan wife...." (Dri, 'Cronistoria di Diocesi e Parrocchie', 1962 Simulia, 2 Aug. 1962, *DAK*/ File s.n.).

20 Lamanna to Battaglierin, 4-6-1963, *DAK* - File 27.

21 "... I have never done any *BICAR* because from the experience of the Confrères who told me about them and from the notes that I have copied from Mgr. Obert, it is the case that if in the past (before Independence) we had some strength, now, in external matters, we have none; every judgement conducted by us, since we want to be logical and righteous, ends in disaster. Even less would I agree to conduct a *bicar* against the Fr. and the catechist in front of an entire village; they would direct falsehoods, unfavourable judgements, pretensions and unacceptable impositions against them. At Beniali we had a similar case during a pastoral visit. I agreed to listen to the people's queries, one by one, and things died down. When I left, they insisted with the Frs. on having a *bicar* and a very humiliating situation emerged...." (Gitti to Lamanna, March 1965, *DAK* - File 27).

22 Lamanna to Battaglierin, 25-3-1965, *DAK* - File 27.

23 Lamanna to Gitti, 16-8-1965, *DAK* - File 27.

Fr. Lamanna returned to Simulia after internment in Khulna during the Indo-Pakistani War (September to December 1965) to find the people in a deplorable economic situation.[24] He did not justify, however, the attitude of the unfaithful Christians, wishing only "to put an end to this farce of trying to make Christians out of the Muchi: they do not want to know about it...". [25] If the disagreements with his Christians had tested Fr. Lamanna's endurance,[26] those with the Bishop struck the final blow. Though the Bishop left him in charge of Simulia, he was never prepared to give him the title of Parish Priest, and their relationship was paved with dissensions. Disagreements were destined to increase and by the end of June 1966, it was decided to replace Fr. Lamanna, who was also due for a year's rest (*Chronicle*: 332). His departure from the mission, which was preceded by further conflict with the Bishop (*Chronicle*: 333-34), did not see the end of the matter, since the Bishop made it clear that he would not be welcome back in the mission.[27] Fr. Lamanna had been equally unfortunate in his relationship with his two assistants, Frs. Tirloni and Bizzeschi,[28] and this situation once again reveals the ambiguities of a spiritual activity meant to 'bring salvation' while the missionaries "damned their souls" by living together.[29] The Christians, who could not but notice these contradictions, should have been entitled to feel the same degree of indignation, as the missionaries felt outrage for their low standard of Christian life. Instead they were , fortunately for the missionaries, used to equating 'right' with 'authority', and in this the missionaries conformed to the Rishi mentality: at a local level, the *bara* Father was always right, and the *chata* Father was always second-best. This does not mean that the Rishi were unable to see the contradictions between what the missionaries taught them and what they actually practised. Furthermore, they learned how to use such situations to their advantage by playing the fathers off one against the other. Though they did not always obtain the results hoped for, they often got very close.

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24 "... There is a disastrous situation in Simulia: people are jobless. They have finished the little rice they had. All day long people come around asking for help..... The school is in a bad state: both students and teachers are keeping going as best they can... People do not come to mass.... I think that this is due to the famine that everybody feels..... The other night someone entered the church and robbed the donations box (around 40 Rs.)...." (Lamanna to Gitti, 18-1-1966, *DAK* - File 27).

25 Ibid.

26 "..... I have had enough of struggling with these disreputable people; I can't stand it any more. I will go to Italy and never come back. This nauseating situation has lasted 6 years. Is this apostolate?....." (Ibid.).

27 Crestani to Luca, 3-12-1966, *XAK* - File V 2.

28 "... On April first, my second marriage. The first one has been unfortunate, with sufficient reasons for a quick divorce..... We'll see about this second experiment. .... I have understood that living together can be infernal..... One last thing is that the long-tongued B., when he went to Bhabarpara, said that the two of us had had a public row and the Christians had come to separate us: a joke in bad taste meant only to make the confrères laugh...." (Lamanna to Dri, 27-3-1963, *XAK* - File V 23).

29 Ibid.

When Fr. Veronesi was appointed to Simulia at the end of June, 1966, he was struck by the extreme poverty of the people,[30] and sought to find alternative means to solve their plight since "... a major problem still to be resolved for them, before we can even begin to talk about religion, is their necessity for daily rice... " [31] The creation of co-operatives, credit unions, and other means of social development, now encouraged by the official theology of Vatican II, had always been promoted by the missionaries, and had later received more support. The problem remained that of reaching everyone,[32] but better times came, when in November 1967, Fr. Veronesi was joined by Fr. Cobbe (*Chronicle*: 363), and social welfare programmes intensified, becoming the central activity of Simulia missionary life. The people's hardship motivated the missionaries to venture into bigger projects, and soon Fr. Cobbe started organising credit unions among the Christians, in order to redeem their land from mortgages and to raise money for a proper irrigation project. The novelty of this was the involvement of Muslims and Hindu farmers, together with the Christians.[33] Three crops were harvested a year instead of one and the immediate outcome of such prosperity was the extension of the primary school into three years of secondary school. The ghetto status of the Christian Rishi was fractured and in Simulia they were respected by others, serving as an example for the people in the outstations.

The projects also proved a great advantage for the small farmers who could never have achieved such results by themselves. In normal circumstances they were obliged, especially in times of difficulty, either to sell or mortgage their land to big landowners.[34] The latter, who had always taken advantage of them, were not at all pleased with the progress of the small farmers, and were always ready, at the first opportunity, to threaten their advancement. Part of the novelty was also the participation of women in the whole enterprise.[35]

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30 " Sometimes I am penniless -he wrote to his brother- I have incurred some debts to help those in desperate situations.... I have realised that I have a soft heart, and, when I am not able to help those in need, I suffer even more..." (Veronesi to Tullio Veronesi, 4-8-1966, *Notiziario Saveriano*, N° 92: 54).

31 Spagnolo-Garello 1979: 69-70.

32 "... Our greatest suffering here is the distress in which many find themselves.... and when bread is scarce, matters of the soul have difficulty finding their way....." (Veronesi to Tullio Veronesi, 12-3-1967, *Notiziario Saveriano*, N° 92: 55).

33 " Not only did the community start hoping in a better future, but a co-operative of people belonging to different villages and different faiths was created. Muslims, Christians and Hindus met once a week to solve together their economic difficulties..." (Cobbe, *'Notiziario Saveriano'*, N° 145, 15-2-1975: 29-30).

34 ".... The average farmer owns an acre of land and has work only for six months a year; when the flood comes, the average farmer not only lives in starving conditions but has to mortgage his land to a wealthier farmer for a small amount of money and, little by little, he finds himself with no land at all. With irrigation an acre of land is sufficient to support an ordinary family. Irrigation also helps to create small industries and small businesses: e.g. small shops, rice-mills etc...." (Cobbe to Boylan, Project 'Compassion'-Australia, 17-1-1970, *SPA*).

35 " He also taught the women to work in the fields, thus earning some money: this was something never seen before!" (Cobbe, 'Notiziario Saveriano', N° 145, 15-2-1975: 29-30).

When Bishop Battaglierin resigned and the diocesan economy came under scrutiny, the superiors became concerned with "the volume of work" carried out in Simulia.[36] Trying to justify his activity from an evangelical viewpoint, Fr. Cobbe maintained that

> ... Survival here has the upper hand over religion. These people who suffer hunger every day and live in extreme anguish because they cannot find a job to satisfy their children's hunger, think first of the basic needs of life, asking first for a piece of bread or a plate of rice, and only thanking God thereafter...[37]

Through organised labour, Muslims and Hindus started associating with the Christians, and the former 'impurity' of the Rishi was lessening.[38] Fr. Cobbe went as far as to criticise his own confrères who, according to him, did not recognise the 'signs of the time' and the changing role of the missionary. His observations anticipate a change of attitude which comes close to the "ideal dialogue" - or the utopian dream - searched for by the missionaries during the seventies and eighties in their activity in Bangladesh.[39]

Fr. Cobbe's ambition to integrate the role of the missionary as a man of initiative and enterprise, with his role as a *guru*, spiritual guide and priest, made him a perfect companion to the saintly Fr. Veronesi. The two complemented each other and their collaboration would have gone far, had it not been for Fr. Veronesi's death during the 1971 Liberation War.[40] Fr. Cobbe, more than anyone, felt the loss of a friend and teacher: "together they shared the suffering of their people, from him he had learned many things, and with him he had started the projects" (Garello 1978: 153) which revolutionised the face of Simulia. Without devaluing the other missionaries who worked in Simulia, we have to return to the times of Fr. Nava to find another missionary addressed by the Simulia people as '*sadhu*'. What Fr. Nava

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36 13 May 1970: "Another meeting of the Counsellors and Religious Superior [Fr. Chiofi] to decide about the volume of work to be granted to Fr. Cobbe in Simulia...." (*Chronicle*: 389).

37 Cobbe, '*Notiziario Saveriano*', N° 145, 15-2-1975: 31.

38 "While earlier the Simulia village was despised, now they call it '*sanar gram*', the golden village, and the Muslims have no objection coming here for the social welfare meetings" (Ibid.).

39 " Some missionaries fail in their activity, either because they have not been sufficiently trained in social welfare, or because they have prejudices against the non-Christians, or again because they are far too preoccupied with proselytising, without paying attention to environmental circumstances. One irrevocable principle, which should be maintained, is that no activity should be created for the sole advantage of the mission [Christians], but all of them should be to the advantage of the whole [human] community, and possibly of the nearby communities, without distinction of faith or religion. Furthermore, a missionary should work as leader and organiser only at the beginning. His main preoccupation should be that of preparing the people [to replace him] so that his direct action will then no longer be needed....." (Ibid.: 31-2).

40 It was Fr. Cobbe who on April 3rd, 1971, accompanied Fr. Veronesi to Jessore, needed there to give comfort and courage to the people and the confrères. As soon as Fr. Cobbe realised the gravity of the situation in Jessore, he urged Fr. Veronesi to return to Simulia with him, but the latter preferred to stay there, and share the fate of the Jessore people. He was active in organising first aid to the wounded. The next day he went with Fr. Alberton and two nurses to the Jessore General Hospital which had asked for their assistance. Soon after, he was killed by Pakistani soldiers.
Fr. Mario Veronesi was born in Rovereto (Trento-Italy) on 10th November 1912. After serving the Army in Trento and Libya for 18 months he returned to Rovereto and worked as shop-assistant. When was 24-25 he decided to become a missionary and joined the Xaverians for the Noviciate on 14th August 1941. In March 1948 he was ordained priest and for two years worked as bursar in the Xaverian Mother House of Parma. After two years as Rector in Ancona, in 1952 he was appointed to the mission in East Pakistan.

had achieved during a long period among the Rishi, Fr. Veronesi achieved with an intensity of life, pursued to the bitter end.

After Fr. Veronesi's death, all responsibility for Simulia parish fell on Fr. Cobbe's shoulders and the situation, with the Liberation War still in progress, was as burdensome as ever: the Christians were escaping to India, the Hindus were suffering retaliations, and collaborationists with the Pakistani Army were threatening the missionaries' life. Fr. Cobbe had to repatriate in October 1971, and upon his return in June 1972, realised that although the war was over, the country was in terrible distress and the Government in need of help to rebuild the Nation. He threw himself into this with his usual enthusiasm and as soon as he reached Simulia he began preparing projects to be approved by the Regional Office of CORR in Khulna. These projects involved the excavation of 450 deep tube-wells and the creation of rickshaw, weaving, and bamboo-mat co-operatives[41] as well as programmes for the re-habilitation of women. Simulia at this time was like an oasis while all around people were starving: prices had doubled, unemployment was on the increase and the Government was failing to win the war against corruption. Bands of dacoits were assaulting the people in their own homes, killing and taking whatever they could.[42]

Nevertheless, the dreams of both Fr. Veronesi and Fr. Cobbe were becoming a reality in the Simulia area, even if they ran counter to the age-long traditions of village society. It had already been a great achievement to see Muslims, Christians and Hindus working together. It was a kind of miracle to get others to accept the Rishi as human beings (*manus*) and an even greater miracle to make the Rishi believe in themselves. These changes threatened the control of the Muslim landowners over the Rishi. The fear of the landowners was not the presence of this foreigner, but the attitude of the Rishi and other poor who were starting to believe him, and thus to believe in themselves. They had seen many missionaries come and go, but no substantial changes; here was a different case altogether, since this man had believed in the people and they in him. On the night of October 10th, 1973, after a quarrel with some Muslims, Fr. Cobbe and his faithful helper, Manuel Mistri, were killed by a gun shot. Six days later, Fr. Cobbe's funeral was held in Simulia Church and he was buried, as he had wished, beside Fr. Veronesi.

After Fr. Cobbe's death, his confrères assessed the direction to their future work:

> Our work and life will resume as usual, or better said, in a different way, since the lesson that Fr. Cobbe has taught us, has made us humbler, maybe more modest and certainly more sensitive to the

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41 Cobbe to Regional Director CORR-Khulna, 'Rickshaw Project', 4-9-1972, *SPA*; Cobbe to Regional Director CORR-Khulna, Power-tillers' Report, 22-9-1972, *SPA*; Cobbe to Regional Director CORR-Khulna, Projects for mats made of reeds and Co-operative weaving for Simulia, 22-8-1972, *SPA*.

42 "..... The country has not recovered yet ... At the centre, in one way or another, we keep on going and give work to everyone, but in the surrounding villages there is extreme poverty.... There is no work there, and many people cannot even afford one daily meal... (Cobbe, to his parents, 4-3-1974, *Notiziario Saveriano*, N° 145, 15 Feb. 1975: 40).

> tragedy and the mystery of the Bengali people who never cease to remind us of the truly essential...[43]

One of these essentials was the idea of human dignity to be achieved through the possibility of earning an honest living: "All the other missionaries gave us something: roads, houses, churches; but only he taught us how to work; he used to come with us to the fields to clean the rice; he included the women, because they too, according to him, have the right to earn their daily bread.... He did not like us to use the word 'Muchi', and he would say: 'If you keep that word in your head, it will come out of your mouth'...".[44] In his eagerness to reach his goal, he forced the people along at his own pace, pushing them around, "not only with his words". His work, however, ended before he could complete it. This sense of something fragmented and incomplete was still felt some years after Fr. Cobbe's death:

> Following Fr. Cobbe's murder, Simulia seemed to have come to a standstill. Nobody went after the killers... Nobody looked for the real culprits. Everything stopped... It was as if the mechanism of every activity had been halted by a thousand queries.... In a country that spares no monument, the unfinished work of Fr. Cobbe stands as a lesson for both humility and hope....(Garello 1978: 248).

SATKHIRA 1962-1973

The frequent changes of personnel in Satkhira mission during previous years continued into this second decade, and the varying style of individual missionaries added to the confusion of an already ambiguous relationship with the Christians.

Despite the critical economic situation, Satkhira mission expanded from July 1962 when Fr. Bello took charge, and new villages were accepted into the fold.[45] The "contract" of acceptance followed a schema according to which the people would offer land on which to build a school-chapel and the missionary would pay for the building.[46] After an initial period of mutual congratulation, the costs of the building would begin to escalate. This pattern was repeated on the level of personal relationships: normally, after the first warm welcome,[47] some complication would follow.[48] When the Rishis' request

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43 *Mosquito*, 'Luce d'un giorno novo', October 1974: 7.

44 Ibid.: 22.

45 *SAT. 7*: 128-134; Bizzeschi to Castelli, 30-8-1963, *XAK* - File V 23.

46 23 July 1962: "Two new catechumens arrive from Roghunatpur with Soshi, teacher and catechist of Goalchator, to offer a piece of land to build a chapel. ... I agree the contract ...and give them an account of 130 Rs...." (*SAT. 7*: 128).

47 5 Aug. 1962: "Fr. Bello makes an official visit to Roghunatpur. Conclusion of the negotiations for the land: 1 *bigha*, 200.71 Rs. Half for the chapel and half for the cemetery..... The people are very happy and satisfied. A very singular scene: the women in turn wash the father's feet and dry them with their saris.... Soshi will go there three times a week for religious instruction..." (*SAT. 7*: 129).

48 9 Aug. 1962: "A former Christian, Agatha Himoldashi, from Sagdah and married to Roghunatpur in the Hindu rite, has been found hanged in her house. The body is brought to Satkhira. The doctor thinks that she had been strangled..... A

involved greater expenses, the missionary became suspicious, since ".... if they turn to us to have their problems solved, they will leave on the same basis...." (*SAT. 7*: 134). Apparently, the missionary was reluctant to accept 'aggregation' to Christianity of those who might create problems either in the economic field or in the Christian sphere of life. However, this was not always a clear-cut choice, and although the missionary no longer saw the 'salvation of souls' as his main task, he was always tempted by the prospect of increasing his flock.[49]

Mixed feelings about accepting new Rishi villages were compounded by the low standards of the existing Christians,[50] their continuous quarrels, and the ineffectiveness of the catechists.[51] Hardly, if ever, did these missionaries blame themselves, their inadequate methodology, and, above all, their own dissensions and lack of unity. Although Fr. Bizzeschi had to leave Satkhira over a controversy with Fr. Bello,[52] the Christians were judged "... extremely vulgar, and not least of a beastly and wicked disposition! [Gente tutta di bassissima lega, nonché di animo malvagio e animalesco!]"[53] and "...people of little faith!".[54]

Things seemed to improve in Satkhira when Fr. Seraphin Dalla Vecchia, after leaving Baradal, joined Fr. Bello in April 1963. Henceforth, Fr. Seraphin began visits to the Satkhira outstations as a

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couple of days later her husband and her father-in-law are arrested by the police, taken to prison and beaten..... They are still there (29-8-62).... Fr. meets the O.P. of Kolaroa who promises to be merciful..." (*SAT.7*: 129). 16 Sept. 1962: "The two people from Roghunatpur arrested for homicide are set free, due to lack of evidence..." (*SAT. 7*: 130).

49 This was the case, for instance of Ram Krishnapur village, near to Kolaroa, visited by Fr. Bello in January 1963, "...where the people became Protestant but now they want to change over to us. Soshi accompanied the Fr. ... It proved difficult to judge their reasons and the extent of their sincerity. Nevertheless their petition was signed and stamped..." (*SAT.7*: 136).
".....Coming back, the Fr. stops at Deora and Langoljara, where they too want to change from Protestantism to Catholicism. .... After dinner, the Protestant Pastor comes to ask the Fr. not to destroy his work, which cost him many sacrifices. The Fr. answers that Religion cannot be imposed. If they want to become Catholics they are free to do so, and nobody can prevent them....." (Ibid.).

50 In Dhandia a marriage case, after an eight hour *bicar*, had to be brought to the attention of the O.C. of Kolaroa, and in Goalchator Fr. Bello was not satisfied with the results of the Mofussil: "....Many problems in this village ... due also to the catechist Soshi Luis Biswas who, with his falsity and antagonism, creates division within this village. It is well-known that these Christians are thieves and scoundrels by nature, but despite this they want to be presented as models of honesty...." (*SAT. 7*: 139).

51 Fr. Bello gave a harsh judgement on Joseph Pande, "... it is a well known fact, [he] is not a teacher but a merchant....", without taking into account the whole preceding history. If he were more a merchant than a catechist, this might have happened because the missionaries asked him to involve himself in business, defending the interest of the mission. However, it is also revealed from the mission diaries that Joseph not only made important contributions to the discussion of theoretical themes at catechists' and headmen's meetings, but he had also been a valuable negotiator when some problems had arisen between the missionaries and the Rishi. His authority was not restricted to the Rishi group but was recognised and appreciated also by the Muslims and for this reason he could help the Rishi with their troubles with some Muslims in Baradal (*SAT. 7*: 140, 6 April 1963).

52 Bizzeschi to Dri, 17-1-1963, *XAK* - File V 24; Dri to Bello, 7-2-1963, *XAK* - File V 23; Bello to Dri, 5-3-1963, *XAK* - File V 24; Battaglierin to Bizzeschi, 28-3-1963, *DAK* - File 29; Bizzeschi to Castelli, 30-8-1963, *XAK* - File V 23.

53 *SAT.7*: 142 (Goalchator, 12 May 1963).

54 Apparently in Roghunatpur some had refused to take part in the religious instruction of the catechist, because the father did not listen to their plea to help a sick person (Ibid.).

'travelling missionary', stopping in the villages for many days in order to preach.[55] His apostolic successes were explained by those who knew him in term of his ability to transmit joy to others, by favouring those manifestations of popular religiosity such as dances, processions and *jattras*, and mingling with the people, including the non-Christians, dancing with them during the feasts.[56] Apostolic success was conditioned, however, by the willingness of the missionary to spend time and money on his Christians: whilst in Goalchator Fr. Bello had to celebrate Christmas Midnight Mass in an empty chapel,[57] the Jogodanandakati Christians thanked the missionary for their new *pakka* church by a huge turnout.[58]

In October 1963, at the suggestion of Fr. Koster, Satkhira celebrated the Silver Jubilee of the mission, and there was a great gathering from the outstations.[59] Fr. Koster himself was present as guest of honour, together with the former Xaverian parish priests, but Fr. Bello lamented that the main speakers at the memorial ceremony, praised Fr. Koster at the expense of recounting 25 years of history. Even today the elders of Baradal still feel very attached to Fr. Koster.

Fr. Seraphin replaced Fr. Bello as parish priest in March 1964, and intensified his visits to the outstations, building *pakka* chapels there,[60] to the delight of the people, and started to organise meetings for the youth.[61] He lamented the increase of tension between the Bishop and the missionaries[62] but realising that the Bishop's presence was a boost for the confidence and self-esteem of

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55 27 June 1963: "Fr. Seraphin goes to Senergati for Mofussil....."; 30 June: "Sunday... in the evening procession with the statue of the Sacred Heart in the village streets...." (*SAT.7*: 144).

56 "People praised his simple approach to them, his easy smile and the friendship given to everybody, his disposition to give a warm welcome also to the non-Christians. His preaching was full of warmth and assurance, concrete and direct, derived from the language, proverbs and examples of everyday life. The most humble people used to say: 'With Fr. Seraphin we cannot even grouch, because he understands our dialect'. His personality and humble attitude inspired empathy. To the good intuition of the Bengali he appeared as a man of peace and reconciliation...." (Garello, *Cento Villaggi per Serafino*, n.d.: 58-9).

57 "... Despite a very boisterous loud speaker (a novelty for this village), and repeated invitations to come to church, it was impossible to persuade the Christians, with the result that the chapel was almost empty for midnight Mass....." (*SAT.7*: 155).

58 "Various Christians, after many years, finally return to receive the Sacraments..... On Christmas evening the community is united for supper under the evocative Christmas Tree, prepared by the Sisters...." (Ibid.). This too, like the loud speaker in Goalchator, must have been a novelty in Jogodanandakati, and although the Fr. was so intent on eradicating Rishi-Bengali superstitions, he had no scruples in suggesting a European 'superstition' to his Rishi Christians.

59 As Fr. Bello himself recognised, the Xaverians resident in Satkhira would certainly not have remembered this occasion if it had not been for Fr. Koster reminding them. He wrote a letter, on the 7-8-1963, from St Patrick's Church, Dum Dum - Calcutta, where he was serving at that time (*SAT. 7*: 147).

60 Dalla Vecchia to Battaglierin, 7-4-1964, *DAK* - File 29; Battaglierin to Dalla Vecchia, 27-4-1964, *DAK* - File 29.

61 In June 1964 Fr. Seraphin preached a retreat, helped by Joseph Pande, to 52 young men who arrived to Satkhira from the outstations. The experiment was repeated in 1965 and 115 youth from all the villages met in Dhandia for three days. In the evening of the last day, after the Eucharistic procession, they sang *kirtan* throughout the whole night (*SAT.7*: 173, 1-3 May 1965).

62 " If reciprocal confidence is lacking, work becomes bitter..." (Dalla Vecchia to Castelli, 21-9-1964. In Garello: n.d.: 63).

the Christians, he used every pretext to invite Mgr. Battaglierin as often as possible.[63] The Curia, however, was preparing to replace him on the grounds that, despite the harmony between the Satkhira missionaries, close collaboration and communication were lacking.[64] Furthermore, Fr. Seraphin had lately been too involved with building work and had neglected the Christians.[65] The matter was, in fact, resolved by contingent events, when the missionaries had to abandon Satkhira in September 1965, due to the Indo-Pakistani War, and Fr. Seraphin was shortly after refused the 'Stay permit' and compelled to repatriate.[66]

Between February 1966 and February 1968, Fr. Bernacchi took charge of Satkhira and during this period he devoted himself to pragmatic goals: one was the active financial participation of the Rishi Christians in the mission projects, so as not to create "a bunch of beggars". Not without difficulty, he managed to create co-operatives and credit unions in Satkhira centre and then to expand to the outstations with the help of his catechists to whom he communicated his strict priorities: 1) Education, 2) Co-operatives, 3) Religion. Following the principle "if man is not man, he cannot have religion",[67] he maintained that "we have to form the 'man'...".

This theo-philosophical position, which corresponds to the need felt by the missionaries, particularly after Vatican II, to systematically prepare those who were to receive baptism, was not completely new: it goes back a long way to when missionaries first contacted indigenous people in the New World and in Africa. The issue then was whether they had a proper soul, created by God and thus deserving the sacrament of Baptism. Once this was accepted, they needed 'salvation' reached only through Baptism. The missionaries in Khulna, however, though accepting the principle that a sacrament was effective "*ex opere operato*", realised also that the old principle "*natura non facit saltus*" applied to their work among the Rishi. In other words they thought that administering Baptism and calling them "Christians" was not sufficient to make them 'humans'.

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63 *SAT. 7*: 173-4; *Chronicle*: 293-4.

64 " .... Of what happens in the parish or the villages the good Seraphin never says a word, even when we ask for news. Thank God there reigns perfect harmony, charity and ... happiness, but a close collaboration to make a perfect parochial life is lacking....." (Salvetti to Gitti, 30-6-1965, *XAK* - File V 23). Fr. Parmigiani too lamented this lack of communication and his difficulty in collaborating with Fr. Salvetti (Parmigiani to Crestani, 17-4-1965, *XAK* - File V 24).

65 "..... We should put an end to material works otherwise the parish will go to ruins. ... Fr. Seraphin wanted to admit some boys to First Communion who were not previously prepared for it. This is not admissible!...." (Parmigiani to Gitti, 3-5-1965, *XAK* - File V 24).

66 20 Dec. 1965: " It has not been possible to write the chronicle of the last three months, because on Sept. 13th we were all 'interned' [as aliens in war time] in Khulna, due to the war which started on 7th Sept. 1965 [between India and Pakistan]. It is impossible to describe what happened the day we left Satkhira by boat (the roads had already been closed) together with 90 boys and girls... As soon as Fr. Seraphin reached Khulna, he received the order from the authorities to abandon the country as soon as possible! It was a bolt out of the blue! ....." (*SAT. 7*: 175).
14 Sept. 1965: " Fr. Seraphin Dalla Vecchia ... was told that his 'Stay Permit' in Pakistan has been refused. The only reason given was the irregularity of informing the Police of Chittagong instead of that of Rangamati when, two years ago, he went there on holiday..." (*Chronicle* : 301).

67 " Without education and social work tackled together, religion holds no place. God exists and the goats exist but there is no connection between the two. Religion is the relationship between man and God....." (*SAT. 7*:182)

While the former theological position, which defined pagans in need of 'salvation' as lesser persons, was based on the presumption of giving salvation as well as humanity, this new version wanted to give human salvation in a human, or better, Western way. If the missionary accepted that Baptism was not enough to grant salvation or to restore a fallen humanity, he could hardly justify the restoration of humanity by way of education, credit unions and co-operatives. This form of neo-colonialism, better know as developmentism, would never have reached the hearts of the Rishi, who, even though in need of material aid and in search of material gain, could not realise their subjectivity in relation to those who saw them as mere objects of charity and concern. For this reason the Rishi responded to those who had something more and something different to offer them. If, in need, they followed those who tempted them with material gain and money, they were at the same time very suspicious of the different attitudes behind money. They needed someone who could give them - apart from money which they valued highly - time: time to stay with them, time to visit them, time to eat with them, time to be one with them and possibly one of them; time to be and not time to act.

The work started in Satkhira centre was taken, in co-operation with the catechists, to the outstations where people were less open to change. Nevertheless, the Rishi had to accept this innovation just as they accepted others, knowing that this was the only way for them to get something out of the missionary.[68] The policy which, in the past, had assisted the missionaries when bargaining on spiritual matters and moral issues, was now transferred to the economic sphere of missionary-Rishi negotiation.[69] Negotiating with the village people was not enough, however, since obstacles were often set up by the *matabbars* and special arrangements had to be made to ensure their co-operation (*SAT. 7*: 184-5). Furthermore, the missionary also had to face the loose cohesion of the Rishi group in forming co-operatives since they did not trust each other with large sums of money (*SAT. 7*: 188-9). Despite his doubts in the Christians' capabilities ("...given the people we have, we believe it will not work..."), the missionary nevertheless decided to set up the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, intended to help the poorest, although he did not realise that both the people and the catechists considered themselves in this category (*SAT. 7*: 189-90). Fr. Bernacchi was resolute in changing this mentality at least in those Rishi who were approaching him in order to become Christians. He felt it important to set things

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68 "... The tour to the villages continues; it seems that they accept the idea of the co-operative. In Dhandia it works like a Bank: they have a capital of over 2,000.00 Rs. People take out loans but, given their poverty, give back with difficulty...." (*SAT. 7*: 183, 12 May 1966).

69 "The people of Goalchator ask for help: [they used the mission *pukur*, which was in need of renovation ...] The Fr. makes a proposition 'If you enlarge and deepen the *pukur* to twice the size and put fish in it, I will pay half of the costs. I do not expect any profit. With the money you make, you start a co-operative.. Is it a big inconvenience for you if a man works for one hour a day towards it? If you work, to whose advantage will it be, mine or yours? If the *pukur* stays as it is, I will not be surprised if you get cholera or other illnesses. Do not be discouraged since I will be ready to bless you with the oil of the sick, and I will give you this free of charge'. To my surprise and happiness they have a meeting and the headmen have decided to sell the fish in the *pukur* and to make a collection towards the extension work. Seeing their goodwill, the Fr. asks the Bishop for 300.00Rs, as a contribution for them... The people of Kharda make the same request and receive the same answer but they do not move a finger. There are many *durnam* [people of 'bad reputation'] there....." (*SAT. 7*: 183-4).

straight from the outset so as not to create false hopes, and in this respect education would serve a purpose, postponing 'religious commitment' for better times.[70]

Early marriage of girls had always caused tensions, and to avoid apostasy of their Christians many missionaries had to compromise and request dispensations from the Bishop. From the parish register, Fr. Bernacchi realised that all marriages in previous years had been blessed with a 'dispensation' for the girl's age, and he was determined to end this practice. Accusing the men of "being worse than animals" and of treating their women like goats,[71] he became further enraged when a leader naively asked him to condone this attitude.[72] The occasion to introduce a stricter policy came when a thirteen year-old girl was given in marriage by a Hindu ceremony, whereupon the Father refused to celebrate it within the Christian community. Apparently an agreement was reached, following the Father's measure to affect financially those implicated, to send the girl back home until she reached the right age, but the missionary had some doubts as to its success (*SAT. 7*: 187-8).

Meanwhile, the missionary continued his village tour, realising that only in a few places were schooling and education supported by both the people and the catechists. Nine months later the situation had not improved and, reporting to the Bishop, Fr. Bernacchi lamented the catechists' lack of interest in bettering the people's situation through education.

Fr. Bernacchi's failure to change the Rishi became particularly evident at the end of his stay in Satkhira:[73] when the superior asked him to delay his journey to Italy so that he could obtain a re-entry visa for East Pakistan,[74] he replied with a flat refusal ("I wonder how you can ask me to 'remember'

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70 " I have just returned from Kataltola, the village that asked to become Christian. There are there around 50 families. I said that I don't want to hear the word 'religion', since they have already once come and returned to the 'skins'. What I would accept, however, is the school - with the condition that I pay half of the teacher's salary. ... There is nothing more important than the school..... Furthermore, they might lose heart and drop everything. ....." (Bernacchi to Gitti, 23-6-1966, *DAK* - File 29).

71 "... The *Bara* Fr. intervenes against these barbarous customs, accusing them of being worse than animals, because animals at least have sexual relations only if there is sexual maturity: 'You instead sell your daughters to the males, even though they are not fully developed, psychologically, morally, spiritually, or even physically. These are crimes which God cannot forgive even though you have obtained the Bishop's dispensation, because this goes against nature'. The bad mood spreads and the moans intensify; they start blackmailing: 'If it is like that, it is better to return Muchi'. The *Bara* Fr. does not demur: 'The Pakistani Law made 16 the marriageable age for girls. We have to follow that law. Otherwise the Government can rightly accuse us of not obeying the law and not co-operating. ... All the propaganda for Family Planning [started by the Government during that period] also means this: to wait to get married. India fixed the age at 18. Women are not goats. Besides life and milk they have to give much more, and they are able to give it only when they are mature and they know how to co-operate with God and their husband for the procreation of new children of God. Your women have no dignity, because you lowered them to the level of lemons, that you can squeeze and then throw away'...." (*SAT.7*: 186-7).

72 ".... Joseph Pande had been very sincere in saying: 'Father, we couple just like the jackals, the dogs and the goats do. In a woman we look only for a female and nothing else, and we are satisfied with that". The *Bara* violently retorts: 'God would give a special place in paradise to the one who castrates all of you!'... " (*SAT. 7*: 187).

73 *SAT. 7*: 199-201; Bernacchi to Battaglierin, 26-5-1967, *DAK* - File 29.

74 Crestani to Bernacchi, 20-2-1968, *XAK* - File V 24.

Pakistan..... I too have the right to save my soul...).[75] His bitterness undoubtedly came from the lack of response among the Rishi Christians, but it was aggravated by the tensions which developed during that period between Bishop and missionaries.[76]

The distress felt throughout the diocese and country during the last years of this decade, also affected Satkhira: prior to Battaglierin's resignation at the beginning of 1969, Fr. Seraphin Dalla Vecchia had once again been put in charge and by the end of that year, Baradal was again linked up with Satkhira, due to lack of personnel. [77] Hardship increased with the cyclone of November 1970 and the Liberation War which started soon after. Following the killing of Fr. Veronesi, many missionaries left the country,[78] but half of them remained to care for the communities under Fr. Seraphin appointed Acting Superior. His responsibility stretched in all directions, from his mission to the other confrères, to the superiors and missionaries' relatives in Italy asking for news, to the Bengali people suffering under the cruelty of war (Garello 1974: 85).

During the war the situation remained tense and the period of reconstruction which followed was almost equally taxing for the missionaries who improvised as relief operators. Satkhira mission received large sums of money for building houses, installing tube wells and repairing roads, and Fr. Seraphin felt submerged by such abundance. For several months he found himself surrounded by the people and by delegations of Christian and non-Christian village headmen.[79] Many took loans and never returned them and others threatened Fr. Seraphin, who, more than once, was tempted to abandon everything. However, his optimism and trust in human nature helped him to engage in another venture: he recruited more catechists and teachers to start a literacy campaign in many Hindu, Muslim and Christian villages. This intense activity weakened both his physical health and his morale and cast doubts on the value of his relief work, as he himself recognised.[80] He felt more and more inclined to

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75 Bernacchi to Crestani, 21-2-1968, *XAK* - File V 24.

76 Nevertheless, and despite his comment, ten years later, in 1977, Fr. Bernacchi returned to Bangladesh.

77 "... The two parishes [rectories] of Baradal and Satkhira have been re-united due to lack of personnel. Fr. Ceci, Tedesco and I will go there in turns. I have started again, after two years, my old life as boatman and walker..." (Dalla Vecchia to a Confrère 30-12-1969, *Notiziario Saveriano* N° 203: 268).

78 The Superior Fr. Guarniero, "... Fearing that the situation in the country would further deteriorate,..... in consultation with the Bishop, decided to send all the assistant Parish Priests to Italy. Thus by the third week of April almost half the Italian Xaverian Priests and all the Italian Sisters in the Diocese left for Italy" (D' Rozario, M., 'Some historical notes on the Diocese of Khulna', Bishop's House- Khulna, 13 Aug. 1986: 4).

79 ".....Having satisfied their primary needs, he urged the people to think about their future, the work and the schools. The mirage of loans attracted many people to form fishing and mat-making co-operatives. The Muchi of Baradal started a co-operative to make *biri*, the local cigarettes, to sell at the local markets..." (Garello, *Cento villaggi per Serafino*, n.d.: 92-3).

80 "..... The dry season crop has been a complete failure. I am writing this letter from the second floor of the house, with the doors shut, to defend myself from the people who are besieging me for something to eat. There are around four hundred people! .... We built Bangladesh and now we need to build the Bengalis. Now we will work hard towards the school and in a few years we will reap wonderful results....." (Dalla Vecchia to L. Piacere, 22-6-1972, *Notiziario Saveriano* N° 203: 270).

dedicate himself to pastoral activity rather than to relief operations since the latter "would only worsen a situation of dependence". This was particularly the case in the over-protected Christian community, where a ghetto mentality still existed and was re-emerging to haunt the missionary.[81] Hence, when two hundred Muslims, Christians and Hindus forming a local co-operative met in Satkhira during September 1972, the main points discussed were human dignity, solidarity and education.

Although "relief was no longer the most important issue" and the missionaries in Satkhira had begun to concentrate more on their apostolate after Fr. Seraphin's departure for Italy in February 1973, the missionary community decided that he was not to return to Satkhira. Despite his many virtues, Fr. Seraphin had never been a good accountant and those who replaced him had great difficulty sorting out the mission finances. He promised that once in Italy he would seek donors for Satkhira, but the money raised was so small that his successors had to discontinue many of the activities he had started, and in particular abandon several of the 'hundred' new villages he had welcomed.

This community decision appeared to him as a personal condemnation of all his work, and rumours spread that he would never set foot in Bangladesh again. Some elder missionaries helped to resolve the case, and Fr. Seraphin returned the following year, in February, 1974. His new field of action was first among the Christians who had transferred to Khulna: many of them belonged to the Rishi group and had been under his care both in Baradal and Satkhira. Their poverty had brought them nearer to the city, but even those lucky enough to find a job were not better off. He was later transferred to Shehalabunia, but his final missionary effort was, as we shall see, conducted in Baradal, the very place where he had first learned to welcome the Rishi.[82]

BARADAL 1963-73

Despite the replacement of Fr. Dalla Vecchia in 1963, the question of a permanent missionary presence in Baradal became increasingly problematic during this decade, a situation which was not solved merely by changing the Father in charge. Three months after Fr. Spagnolo started living there, the Religious Superior, Fr. Crestani, re-opened discussions on the various difficulties facing a missionary in Baradal. Eventually, however, Fr. Spagnolo seemed to have adapted to the new environment.[83] In October, he was joined by Fr. Salvetti (*Chronicle*: 255), who left after one year, to be replaced by Fr. Ceci (*SAT.7*: 170).

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81 " We should learn from our mistakes of the past and look to the future. One of our major problems is how to establish relationships with the non-Christians..." (Garello, *Cento villaggi per Serafino*, n.d.: 97).

82 Ibid.: 99-114.

83 Crestani to Guarniero and Chiofi, 13-8-1963, *XAK* - file V 5.

The whole question of Baradal was raised once again by Fr. Ceci at the end of 1965 when, in a letter to the Vice-Superior, Fr. Guarniero, he asked for a definitive solution: given that the economic policy favoured those individual missionaries who were able to find means to carry out projects, in Baradal someone was needed "who has the courage, the ability and the money to build a residence and a school".[84] Later, at the end of 1966, the newly elected Prefect of the Missions, Fr. Luca, writing to the Bishop, lamented the difficult situation of the missionaries residing in Baradal, given the poverty of the people, the isolation of that village and the total lack of privacy for the missionaries.[85] When Fr. Luca visited the mission in June 1969 (*Chronicle*: 373), following Battaglierin's resignation, he paid special attention in his Pro-memoria to the local superiors in respect of the situation of Baradal, which he felt had to be examined within the general context of a mission more in need of consolidation than expansion. Fr. Luca recognised that there was a Christian centre in Baradal which needed assistance; there were schools recently opened, a church and a rudimentary house for the missionary, but he suggested a return to the old formula of assisting this community from the Satkhira base.[86] Following his directives, and as a consequence of the General Superior's visit to Baradal in November 1967 (*Chronicle*: 363), by the end of 1969 Fr. Ceci moved to Satkhira, and, as already noted, the three missionaries residing there took turns to visit Baradal and the southern villages.

During this decade the missionaries were again faced with the endemic poverty of the Christians and the related problem of marriage complications. When the Goruikhali people wrote to the Bishop lamenting their miserable state,[87] Fr. Spagnolo suggested sending an article to the "Voce dei Berici", a weekly newspaper in the Italian Diocese of Vicenza, asking for donations to assist this terrible economic crisis.[88] Though intended to evoke the compassion of donors in Italy, the article presents us with a clear picture of the Baradal community during that time:

> ..... The people here are pious and simple but very poor. Worried about the problems of everyday life, they lack that minimum peace needed to dedicate themselves more extensively to the Christian formation that the missionaries wish to give them. It is urgent to provide our neophytes with an honest job so that they can support their families... They have endured a regime of famine since time immemorial...[89]

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84 Ceci to Guarniero, n.d. [end 1965], *DAK* - File 33.

85 Luca to Battaglierin, 14-11-1966, *DAK* - File 35; Battaglierin to Luca, 30-11-1966, *DAK* - File 35.

86 Luca to Chiofi and Crestani, 11-7-1969, *DAK* - File 35.

87 22 Families of Goruikhali to Battaglierin, 3-10-1963, *DAK* - File 33.

88 "..... Some time ago I visited Goruikhali..... There is a lack of essential space there to live decently (let alone Christianly). The Christians have asked for a long time now to be able to breathe...." (Spagnolo to Battaglierin, 15-10-1963, *DAK* - File 33). The article intended to raise money for two projects, the first to buy boats and nets for the Baradal Christians, who suffered famine, and the second to help those of Goruikhali, who, despite measures taken by the missionary, had attended Hindu *sabhas*, in order to earn a living with their musical bands.

89 "... The majority of my Christians work as porters in the local bazaar. But they can work only one day a week, on Sundays, and with that they have to support their families for the entire week. ... In other places they work in bamboo cane, making baskets and mats. Here too they earn the bare minimum not to starve. ..." (Ibid.).

The people's distress was also reflected in their poor participation in religious celebrations (*Chronicle*: 257). Without Fr. Seraphin, this community was certainly less responsive to missionary intervention, although perhaps the money behind him attracted as many people as his zeal. Fr. Spagnolo, however, was not insensitive to the people's troubles, especially when these were intensified by frequent natural disasters.[90] Following the Bishop's pastoral visit in 1964, he asked the Vicar General's permission for a project financing the move to Baradal of a group of catechumens from Maghurkhali. Although disapproving of this project in principle, the Vicar General asked the missionary to act according to his conscience and to the intentions of his donors.[91]

Generally speaking, the missionaries were scrupulous in respecting this: some missionaries certainly targeted a specific project and, once the money was received, the donors' intention was then used to justify a given project to the Curia. In order to prevent such manoeuvres, the Bishop laid down that no money could be requested or collected from donors without previous permission for a given project. Fr. Spagnolo was careful to act accordingly but, in general, financial difficulties and the use of money were the main cause of divisions between the Bishop and the missionaries.

When marriage problems arose, Fr. Spagnolo usually contacted the Bishop or the Vicar General to solve difficult cases. Once, when writing to the Bishop asking for dispensation to celebrate a marriage, not only did he express his perplexities in establishing the age of the girl, but he also seemed to challenge the Rishis' perception of time, given their backwardness.[92] Possibly he was merely excusing them in order to obtain the dispensation. Either way, however, when the missionary referred to a fixed age as a law of the Church binding on all Christians, he did not consider the range of issues entering into marriage negotiations. Apart from the contingent problems of family hardship which could be sufficient reason to give a daughter in marriage, it was necessary to look to the availability of suitors over a given period and to the advantages of making new family alliances, for which timing was also crucial. Furthermore, it was a matter of shame for a girl to remain unmarried and suitable bridegrooms were becoming increasingly scarce. Delay also carried the risk that, if the girl lost her virginity, she would become a burden on the family. Thus the legal limit imposed by the missionaries was not for the Rishi reason enough to abandon their custom of early marriage for girls. This difficulty, far from being resolved, is still prevalent in Rishi Christian communities, and only in the case of girls who continue their studies, is marriage postponed.

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90 Spagnolo to Battaglierin, 8-5-1964, *DAK* - File 33.

91 ".....I do not support the principle of helping catechumens who in this way start to be 'de-formed' even before becoming Christians. Their demands will increase as soon as they become Christians! ....." (Gitti to Spagnolo 1-6-1964, *DAK* - File 33).

92 " .... Here in the Muchis' region, we have difficulty establishing the right age for girls to be married. Many times also with the dispensation '*ad cautelam*', we have doubts since we do not know if the 12th year has been reached. We try to do everything to solve this problem, but the people are so backward that they haven't the slightest perception of time....." (Spagnolo to Battaglierin, 7-7-1964, *DAK* - File 33).

As in other matters, the Baradal Christians resorted to subterfuge when they wanted to celebrate a marriage without the missionary's consent, and despite every intention of ensuring a proper, Christian celebration of marriage, those in the Curia had to compromise and to recognise that: "...unfortunately pressures and constraints can always occur and we cannot avoid them...".[93] Difficulties also arose from the previous missionaries failing to register accurately the age of girls,[94] and the presence of Protestant ministers willing to conduct marriages for Catholics.[95] Moreover, Fr. Spagnolo knew the economic reasons behind marriage alliances, and recognised that he lacked the authority to impose Christian codes on the Rishi.[96]

Alone in Baradal, between 1967 and 1969, Fr. Ceci too had to cope with marriage complications, which were worsened by the direct involvement of the Goruikhali *matabbar* who, so as not to lose face, tried to undermine the missionary.[97] Despite all his efforts to assist the Rishi through education, catechetical instruction and liturgical innovations, Fr. Ceci had always to contend with the power of the leaders and get their support to bring about improvements in Baradal. With the help of catechists and musicians, he placed great emphasis on the celebration of Christian gatherings, or *sobha*, which, though maintaining a Hindu style of singing and praying, were based on the use of the Bible and Christian songs. The eagerness to revive liturgy during this time went as far as asking the Pope to allow the people of Baradal to celebrate the holy day of obligation on Fridays instead of Sundays, and if the first request, made by Frs. Spagnolo and Ceci in May 1965 (*Chronicle*: 291), was opposed by the Vicar-General,[98] further requests seem to have been successful, and still today in Baradal the people celebrate the day of obligation on Fridays.

When Fr. Ceci left Baradal in September 1969, it was a tremendous setback for the Rishi who had been used to a continuous missionary presence since 1957. Furthermore, they were left alone again to deal with the Muslim landlords who, even with the missionary there, never ceased to harass them(*SAT. 7*: 179). Not only did the Muslims take advantage of the Rishi, but once the missionaries ceased to

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93 Gitti to Spagnolo, 9-7-1964, *DAK* - File 33.

94 Spagnolo to Battaglierin, *DAK* - File 33.

95 Spagnolo to Bishop Blair (Anglican Mission-Dhaka), 18-8-1965, *DAK* - File 33.

96 ".... Economic reasons play a great role in these matters.... I am very depressed....." (Spagnolo to Battaglierin, 17-7-1966, *DAK* - File 33).
In March, 1967, whilst asking the Bishop for three dispensations, Fr. Spagnolo reconfirmed his feelings on this matter: "... I know this is not ideal, but in certain cases I believe it is of no use not to grant permission. Two of the young people for whom I ask dispensation (age of the girl), are already living together..... in the second case the father of the girl does not care at all about religion and there is the risk that he could do something deplorable (such as marry her to a Hindu)....." (Spagnolo to Battaglierin, 28-3-1967, *DAK* - File 33).

97 "... The bride's father is the headman, absolute lord of Goruikhali (Gouri Bishonat), and if we put him in a situation of wrong-doing, the whole village is finished for us....." (Ceci to Battaglierin, 25-1-1969, *DAK* - File 33).

98 Gitti to Battaglierin, 30-5-1965, *DAK* - File 33.

reside there, they attempted to take over mission land.[99] It was usually in such moments of need when they felt under threat that these Christians showed the greatest attachment to their 'faith', as was witnessed on October, 1969, when Mgr. Ganguli visited the community there. [100] A similar reaction was seen during the Liberation War when the Baradal Christians turned for help to Fr. Seraphin in Satkhira.[101]

Until 1978, when Fr. Germano started residing in Baradal once again, the process of reconstruction was even slower there than in other missions. Many people tried to escape their troubles by moving to the city of Khulna.

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99 Crestani to Dalla Vecchia, Ceci and Tedesco, 22-11-1970, *DAK* - File 29.

100 4 Oct. 1969: " Mgr. Ganguli, accompanied by Fr. Crestani, visits Baradal... The welcome of the people was very warm and enthusiastic. The church was full and participation in the sacraments great....." (*Chronicle*: 379).

101 "..... From Baradal some Christians arrive out of breath bringing bad news: 'Soldiers have bombarded the church from the river. The mother of a seminarian, hit by shrapnel, has died. The catechist Agustin managed to save the Eucharist from profanation, and then had to remain sunk in the mud for an hour, with a bayonet at his chest. The soldiers wanted to find out from him where the partisans were hiding'..." (Garello, *Cento villaggi per Serafino*, n.d.: 88).

3. Third and Fourth Decades (1973-1990)

Rishi-missionary dialogue over the last two decades requires assessment through a larger spectrum of activity which includes a) changes occurring in the Catholic Church as a whole, b) growth and developments in the Bangladeshi Church, c) the implementation of a new missionary policy by the Xaverians in Khulna and d) a new style of presence among the Rishi.

a) Missionary policy in the Catholic Church post Vatican II

Catholic mission theology immediately prior to Vatican II, reflecting two different currents of missionary thought,[1] was centred on an exclusive ecclesiocentrism, according to which the Church was identified with the Kingdom of God and seen as a universal, historical and geographical unit with a central and pyramidal hierarchy, and mission was understood as an expansion of this. As a result, salvation could be obtained only through the Church.[2] This position, supported by Augustine and involving Aquinas, was partially attenuated in the Council of Trent, which had to justify the possibility of salvation for all the newly discovered peoples who never heard of the Gospel.[3] The Church, however, remained the sole channel of grace, as was reflected by both schools of thought and by the five papal encyclicals produced between 1919 and 1959 by four different popes.[4]

Though the conciliar decree on missionary activity '*Ad Gentes*' (December 7, 1965) reflected the aims of the two schools and the teachings of the Popes (evangelization, establishing a local church and personal conversion), it borrowed from the constitution '*Lumen Gentium*' the term of "sacrament" and "sign", implying that the mission of the Church is to make Christ "present by the entire life of the concrete community as God's people.... The accent, then, goes to the quality of the community's witness not to the need to convert non-believers".[5] Furthermore, *Ad Gentes* and four other closely

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1 1) the Münster School (J. Schmidlin - around 1917) which, borrowing from the Protestant G. Warneck, affirmed the aim of missions to be Christianisation through evangelisation and individual conversion; and 2) the Lovain School (P. Charles - around 1924-25) which, on the contrary, insisted that the primary goal of missionary activity was the establishing of the Church in 'pagan' territories ('*plantatio ecclesiae*').

2 The early position of the Church's Fathers who recognised an implicit revelation in other religions as a manifestation of God ('*logoi spermatikoi*' of Justin), was soon replaced by the statement "outside the Church there is no salvation".

3 The theological shift on that occasion was from "outside the Church no salvation" to "without the Church no salvation".

4 Benedict XV, *Maximum Illud* (1919); Pius XI, *Rerum Ecclesiae* (1926); Pius XII, *Evangelii Praecones* (1951); Pius XII, *Fidei Donum* (1957); John XXIII, *Princeps Pastorum* (1959). While Benedict XV in his 1919 encyclical *Maximum Illud* ('On spreading the Catholic faith throughout the world') stresses the conversion of non-believers to the Church so that they may be saved, Pius XII in the *Evangelii Praecones* (1951) calls for the establishment of a local church with a local hierarchy, a church, however, completely based on the Roman model.

5 "... In seeing the church as a sacrament, Vatican II accentuates the "manifestation" nature of Christianity, which sees Jesus and his church giving witness to the universal but hidden Logos/ratio/plan of God, which operates mysteriously everywhere, but especially and decisively (though not necessarily uniquely, absolutely and exclusively) in Jesus" (Burrows 1985: 2-3).

related Vatican II documents,[6] take into account the position of the Church in a rapidly changing scenario.[7]

In Catholic circles, especially after World War II, the phrase 'post-Christian era' gained currency among church leaders and theologians. This was also favoured by the publication in 1943 of "*France, pays de mission ?* " (Godin and Daniel), in which it was argued that a geographical division between Christian and non-Christian countries had become untenable, thus subverting the geographical theology upon which the concept of '*Missio ad gentes* ' had been based.[8] The questions posed by Godin and Daniel also opened up new problems related to the introduction of politics into missionary conscience, and by taking into consideration the reality of the working classes in Europe, the Church discovered itself on the side of the oppressors with the non-Christians as the oppressed so that many within the Church felt the need to conduct politics differently.[9]

While Vatican II re-affirmed the need of the Church for salvation, it also took a distinctive new turn when, "for the first time in official church statements, it praised individual world religions for the way they reflect 'that Truth which enlightens every person' " (Knitter 1984: 50). This thesis, expressing implicitly that religions are ways of salvation, found its inspiration in Rahner's theology, which was grounded on two main premises: God's universal will to salvation and humanity's essential social nature.[10] For Rahner, God's saving presence "is greater than man and the Church", and his grace is not bound to the Church but to Christ.[11]

> In sum, within the universal salvific will of God, the ultimate state of those who appear to be beyond the visible bounds of the church as 'the people of God' lies within the gracious providence

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6 These are the ' Dogmatic Constitution on the Church' (*Lumen Gentium*), which provides the indispensable context for considering *Ad Gentes*, the 'Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions' (*Nostra Aetate*), the 'Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World' (*Gaudium et Spes*), and the 'Decree on Ecumenism' (*Unitatis Redintegratio*).

7 ".... (T)he context for understanding Vatican II includes the post-Christendom age, the ecumenical movement, worldwide pluralism, the epochal decline in the West's global hegemony, and the rapid, powerful emergence on the universal stage of Asia, the Pacific, Africa, and Latin America" (Hogg 1985: 146).

8 " The mission understood as a transfer of the '*societas christiana*' from a Christian to a non-Christian country was put into crisis..... Our two authors continue thinking of the mission as a departure from a Christian to a non-Christian country, but the non-Christian country is not Africa any longer; it is instead the working class, a stratum of French society. By doubting that France, firstborn of the Church, was still a Christian country, they were overturning the whole cultural and theological picture" (Dianich 1984: 11).

9 Another aspect of this same problem is revealed when political activity is born within a Christian environment, as happened in Latin America, this requiring a diverse political conscience of the mission: " While in fact, in Europe the bourgeois and socialist revolutions happen as movements of emancipation even in relation to the Church, or against it, in Latin America these movements are born within a Christian environment" (Ibid.: 12).

10 " Combining the two ingredients: if God wills to grant grace to every person, this grace must take on a sociohistorical 'body' in order to be really available; and among the most likely mediating bodies for grace are the religions. The religions are or can be 'grace-filled' ways of salvation and are positively in God's plan of salvation. What enables Rahner to draw this conclusion is his subtle but significant shift from ecclesiocentrism to Christocentrism." (Knitter 1984: 50).

11 Furthermore, Rahner explains this extra-ecclesial, non-implicit operation of the grace of Christ in other religions in terms of an anonymous or unconscious connection between the non-believer and Christ (Rahner 1969/VI: 390-98; cf. also Vols. 12 and 14).

> of God. Yet in its new covenant in Christ, the church knows that its obedience is to reach out to all peoples (*ad gentes*). In a few paragraphs Vatican II produced a sea change in Catholic understanding for those of other faiths or of no faith (Hogg 1985: 148).

This 'sea change' had the same impact within the Catholic Church as the earlier creation by the Protestants of the World Council of Churches (WCC) to give a new voice to non-western Christianities. Already during the Council, Pope John XXIII presented two encyclicals[12] on the role of the Church in promoting justice, social advancement and conditions for peace.[13] Ten years after *Ad Gentes*, Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (December 8, 1975) claims new ground on several points: evangelization is centred on the mission of the whole Church, including not only the proclamation of the Christian message but also the permeation of culture, education, politics, art etc. in all strata of society. Consequently, evangelization is directed to the de-Christianised, to those of other religions, non-believers, non-practising and practising Christians (re-evangelization). Furthermore, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, in an attempt to address Latin American 'Liberation Theology', "links evangelization to the struggle for a just society and presents a papal theology of Christian liberation" (Hogg 1985: 149),[14] stressing the fundamental unity between evangelization and human advancement. At the same time, the papal exhortation warns those communities (*Comunidades eclesiales de base*) not to fall victim to political option and parties. This produced a stricter control from Rome over local churches[15] and the priorities of Liberation Theology established at Medellín (Colombia, 1968) by CELAM,[16] were re-conducted within the limits given by *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, at Puebla (Mexico, 1979), especially with the intervention at the Conference of Pope John Paul II.[17] However, despite the power held by the

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12 These are *Mater et Magistra* ('Christianity and Social Progress', 1961) and *Pacem in Terris* ('Peace on Earth', 1963).

13 Some years later, his successor Paul VI, after visiting all the continents and promoting the development of those peoples newly freed from the colonial yoke, wrote the encyclical 'On the development of Peoples' (*Populorum Progressio*, 1967), established the pontifical commission 'Justice and Peace', and launched the Synod of Bishops, who were to meet in Rome to discuss world justice and evangelization.

14 ".....Fundamental human rights cannot be separated from this just liberation which is bound up with evangelization and which endeavors to secure structures safeguarding human freedom...." (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* n° 39).

15 On this basis the 'Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith', presided over by Card. Ratzinger, released on September 3, 1984, the '*Instruction on Certain aspects of the Theology of Liberation*', with the full approval of Pope John Paul II. After Vatican II and a period of openness, the present Pope has tried to re-conduct all the forces at work in the Church within the secure boundaries of Roman magisterium, even by controlling the efforts of local Episcopal Conferences, which sought to find a local response to local problems and situations. One such case has been papal control over the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM).

16 "First to identify church and hierarchy with the poor and the aspirations of the masses and second, to seek a 're-evangelization' and 're-conversion' of the masses and the several elites" (Hogg 1985: 150; cf. CELAM 1968/II: 117-156).

17 In this regard, we must point out that conservative groups, displeased with the new progressive stance of the Church after Medellín, began to assert themselves in CELAM. As a result the CEHILA (Commission to Write the History of the Church in Latin America), founded by E. Dussel, an Argentinean Catholic layman in 1973, broke off from CELAM and constituted itself as an independent association of church historians. The total number of CEHILA authors is around one hundred and the great majority are lay persons.
"..... Unlike other academicians, who seek to maintain a formal distance from their subject of research, CEHILA members are all committed Christians who write history in order to contribute to the strengthening of Christianity itself..... CEHILA, like the liberation theologians, has its sympathizers and its critics. Traditional church historians and conservative churchmen accuse CEHILA of projecting ideological biases into the past. But the new historians say that they are only bringing to light realities that have always been there .... The theme of liberation is present, for example, in the example of Bartolomé de las Casas's struggle in favour of the Indians in the sixteenth century or the

Bishop of Rome, Catholic Christianity has ceased to be merely a Mediterranean or Northern Christianity, since " the center of gravity for the faith has shifted and moves increasingly into what so recently were called 'mission lands'.....''.[18]

It is in the light of this shift that theological reflection has, over the last decades, diverged from official statements. Hans Küng, for instance, speaks for many in his criticism of the 'anonymous Christianity' model,[19] and whilst urging Christians to admit that the church is not necessary for salvation, he views religions as an 'ordinary' way to salvation and Christianity as an 'extraordinary' or special way (Küng 1976: 97-8). Similarly, Schlette interprets the accepted image of the Church as 'Sacrament of salvation', expanding the meaning by which the primary mission of the Church is not to bring salvation but 'epiphany', not to win conversions as a necessary means to salvation but to help build the Kingdom of God as it takes shape within history (Schlette 1965: 83-93).

> Another aspect of this new shift among Catholic theologians is seen in their approach to dialogue. They suggest that Christians should speak with other believers not only to reveal points of agreement and conflict, not only to understand what they (Christians) already have in Christ, but also to discover genuinely new pieces of the mosaic of God's universal revelation (Schoonemberg 1966: 100-107).

Hence, Christianity is not exhaustive for God's revelation, and implicit in this new attitude towards other religions is that, for some Catholic theologians, Christ is no longer "the constitutive, unique..... mediator of salvation for all mankind".[20]

This variety of opinions has produced visible crises within the church especially with regard to the mission *ad gentes*. A research seminar organised by SEDOS[21] in 1969 tried to address the post-Vatican II dilemmas: in discussing why mission work should be carried out overseas with the church projecting a new vision of other religions, the seminar highlighted the 'salvific' role of these religions and the

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Jesuits in colonial Paraguay who armed the Guarani Indians against the Portuguese slave raiders. CEHILA counters its critics by questioning the objectivity of the traditional historians, whose penchant for exactitude may have blinded them to larger social and political issues. CEHILA recognises its own shortcomings as a new experiment. Some of the regional team members are sociologists and anthropologists and not professional historians, and undoubtedly the passion of the moment has influenced some of the judgements of CEHILA...." (Klaiber 1990: 106).

18 " The great new fact of our era is the emergence of the churches of Asia, Oceania, Africa and Latin America. In 1985 they hold 52 percent of the World's Christians; 48 percent are in the West. In fourteen years the balance is projected to become 60 percent and 40 percent respectively..... Even in Asia the Christian growth rate has outstripped population growth.... The church has become visibly and tangibly universal....." (Hogg 1985: 150; cf. Bühlmann 1977).

19 " For Küng this theory is but a theological fabrication, intended to save the 'infallible formula' of outside-the-church-no-salvation. To view other believers as Christians without a name is an offence to them and an obstacle to Christians' ability genuinely to listen to what these others have to say" (Knitter 1984: 51).

20 Just as Rahner no longer linked universal saving grace to the church, many theologians, though recognising the independent validity of other religions, continue to affirm Christ/Christianity's normativeness: "Yet despite this Christological shift and its intent to let the religions stand on their own, all the theologians exploring this new direction continue to affirm Jesus Christ as God's normative revelation. Jesus and the gospel remain "superior or ideal type, which can function to measure, correct and judge others by its own standards"....." (Knitter 1984: 52; cf. Schineller 1976: 555-557).

21 SEDOS, a centre of study and documentation, was founded in Rome at the close of Vatican II to assist the needs of 45 congregations or societies involved in the mission '*ad gentes* '.

role of missions in development. A later SEDOS seminar in 1981, utilising Vatican II documents and *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, centred on current directives: proclamation, dialogue, inculturation and liberation.[22]

Nevertheless, it seems that the "boldest proposals for a revision of approaches to other religions are sounded by Third World mission theologians". Among them, Knitter proposes a reflection on the works of Puthiadam, Maurier and Pieris. " All three give painful witness to how traditional Christian claims of having a 'normative, complete, definitive' revelation in Christ have made Christian dialogue with other faiths an encounter 'between the cat and the mouse' "(Knitter 1984: 52; see Puthiadam 1980: 103-105; 110-11). Pieris, for instance, recognises that the approaches to other faiths coming both from the West and from Latin American 'Liberation Theology', conceal a "crypto-colonialist theology of religions ..... that keeps our revolutionary rhetoric from resonating in the hearts of the Third World non-Christian majorities".[23]

The early shift in Catholic mission theology from ecclesiocentrism to Christocentrism, is expanded to a theocentric perspective which allows Third World theologians such as Pieris to see all religions as partners in a 'salvific dialogue' in which neither the Church nor Jesus, but God and the "mystery of salvation" are the final ground, goal and norm. In this sense, Pieris foresees that "A Liberation Theopraxis in Asia, which uses only the Marxist tools of analysis will remain un-Asian and ineffective" until it integrates "the psychological tools of introspection" that Eastern sages have discovered. Asia's poverty and religiosity are, according to Pieris, two interpenetrating realities which must be considered in shaping a theology that is contextually Asian. For this reason, the Buddhist ideal of voluntary poverty challenges contemporary Christianity, which has failed to question seriously the materialism and consumerism of its own societies. Hence, an authentic Asian theology must integrate voluntary poverty and solidarity with the poor in order to minimise the problem of enforced poverty (Pieris 1988: 80ff).

The debate on the Christian mission and religious pluralism is far from having been resolved. On the contrary, the last twenty years of this debate show a growing interest among theologians, missionaries and lay people of every Christian denomination to keep it alive. Despite the insurgence of radical fundamentalisms and the fear of Christianity becoming submerged by some sort of eclecticism, many missionaries and theologians are ready to risk their once strong and secure 'dogmas' to share the common aspirations of the people with whom they also share their lives. In other words, the Other

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22 " It gave the central role to the 'local church' (that of the region, not a parish). With a larger number of missionaries coming from these churches, the traditional international but Western-based missionary institutes or sending agencies see a need to incorporate these folk" (Hogg 1985: 152; cf. Motte & Lang eds. 1982).

23 " For Pieris the basis and framework for Christian mission and religious encounter should not be Christology (presuming Christ to be either against or within other religions) or theology (exploring whether/how other religions recognise God). Rather, Christian approaches to other faiths should be grounded in soteriology, in the 'ineffable mystery of salvation', which for Pieris is the divine urge and impulse to liberate and generate 'a new humanity'...." (Knitter 1984: 53).

encountered by them, has made an impact and no longer allows the Self to rest on former certainties. This shift in orientation has been attributed by Newbigin to a current which is "part of a drift of contemporary Western culture ..... away from belief in the possibility of knowing truth and towards subjectivity" (Newbigin 1989: 54). The debate in question here is the role of the 'uniqueness, decisiveness and centrality of Jesus Christ' as saviour amidst religious pluralism. Needless to say, it has been this certainty of possessing 'truth' which has enabled Western Christianity to impose on Others its rule, views and set of values. At the same time, that very Self which is secure in the possession of truth, is able to generate conditions in which to recognise a 'truthful' Other, while itself undergoing a crisis, and perhaps evolving towards maturity.

b) Growth and achievements of the Bangladeshi Catholic Church

Vatican II theology was to make a great impact on the Asian Catholic community, given its constant contact with and challenge from the majority of non-Christian masses. On a structural level, since the visit of Pope Paul VI to Manila in 1970, many innovations have been achieved through the Federation of Asian Bishop's Conference (FABC),[24] aided by five sub-committees.[25] The Manila International Congress on Mission, held in 1979,[26] highlighted the major issues facing the Asian Church: "Amid oppression and major disabilities for some new Asian Christians, should the Church "urge" baptism for all?" [27]

Since FABC's creation, and especially since the General Assembly of 1974 at Taipei, it has been affirmed that "the basic mode of mission in Asia" must be dialogue. Although it is difficult to establish the sincerity of a minority church pleading for dialogue, a profound change of attitude can nevertheless be recognised, at least in those who no longer use 'dialogue' as a new camouflage to proselytise. Many Asian theologians and church leaders, ever since the celebration of the Indian Council in 1950, had been expecting a radical, official change in the Church's attitudes. Firstly Vatican

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24 The FABC, created in 1972, holds a general assembly every four years to discuss themes concerning the Church in Asia: the issues discussed in the first assembly (Taipei 1974) concerned evangelization in contemporary Asia; in the second assembly (Calcutta 1978) prayer in the life of the church in Asia, and in the third (Bangkok 1982) the church as a community of faith.

25 The sub-committees of FABC have organised many seminars, some of which go under the name of BISA (Bishops' Institute for Social Action), BIMA (Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate) and BIRA (Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs).

26 The Congress drew 89 of its 200 delegates from thirty-nine Asian countries. The papers of the FABC provided the theological background, along with Vatican II Documents and *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, for the discussion that ensued.

27 "... That painful issue relates to inculturation of the Word within peoples' culture. Other issues included dialogue, liberation, development and basic Christian communities....." (Hogg 1985: 150; cf. Arévalo 1981).

II and later FABC gave impetus to a process already advancing on some fronts,[28] and since the 'local church'[29] has become the "acting subject" of missionary work and dialogue, the role of Western missionaries in Asia is visibly changing.[30] Some Asian theologians, proposing "a full-blown pluralistic theology of religions whose bottom line is finally a parity of religions",[31] reveal a multiplicity of positions within the Church's mission activity and a variety of meaning and intensity in interreligious dialogue.

Amaladoss (1989) stressing that the church is in a mission situation everywhere,[32] invites his readers to "transcend the dispute ... between Christocentrism and Theocentrism by contemplating the Trinity..." (ibid.: 9), thus adopting a holistic viewpoint that springs from 'dialogue'.[33] Despite recognising that "no one today holds the axiom 'there is no salvation outside the church' ", Amaladoss is at pains to combine the "Roman" side of his Catholic faith with the more humble "Indian" approach. His need to mediate 'truth', which backs the Catholic magisterium, seems in the end to vitiate his idea of dialogue, which is then revived by recourse to humility. But the claim to truth and the possession of humility are two extremes which cannot easily be bridged.[34]

It seems that Amaladoss positions himself mid-way between those who promote dialogue, believing that 'truth' will always finally be on their side, and those who accept all the risks of

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28 "... This overarching program of dialogue with the cultures (i.e. inculturation), with the religions and religious traditions (i.e., interreligious dialogue), and with "our peoples, especially the poor multitudes in Asia" (i.e. development/liberation), has been the thematic background of both the pastoral and missionary activity of the local churches of Asia in the past twenty years..... For the 1990s these dialogues remain the headings under which the concerns and activities of Christian mission are collocated. It is in the endeavor to bring these dialogues into life and practice, and in the ongoing reflection on the processes they have initiated, that the way of theologizing on mission must surely by constructed in the decade to come" (Arévalo 1990: 50).

29 This definition qualifies the entire Catholic community in a given time and place.

30 " In practice... mission is no longer, and can no longer be, a one-way movement from the 'older churches' to the 'younger churches'.....", so that "the internationalization of the missionary movement is the great new fact of our time" (Arévalo 1990: 51).

31 " ... (S)till the Asian Roman Catholic bishops in their statements on mission and interreligious dialogue have been consistent in holding the 'traditional' view on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the one mediator of God's salvation in history" (Ibid.).

32 " The age of mission that took Christianity to Asia, Africa, and Latin America coincided with the colonial period. While the interests of the missionaries and the colonialists did not always coincide, the missionaries certainly profited by the logistics provided by the colonial structures. We are now living in a postcolonial situation, at least politically..... Mission is no longer considered as the work of missionaries who leave their country to proclaim the gospel in strange lands..... Moreover, the church seems to be in a mission situation everywhere in the world...." (Amaladoss 1989: 8).

33 " Proclamation or witness that respects the freedom both of the individual and of God cannot but be dialogical. Correspondingly the aim of dialogue is not merely to promote mutual knowledge and understanding, but also to witness to one's deepest faith convictions and thus provide a challenge to mutual growth toward the common end, namely, God. Such dialogue is neither syncretistic nor relativistic. It does not suppose that all religions are the same or that everything is true. But it demands a respect that discerns God's presence and action wherever it is found and a humility that does not have any exclusive claim to God's truth and love" (Ibid.).

34 For this reason, while other theologians prefer to emphasise either Christocentrism or Theocentrism, he proposes a return to a Trinitarian theology: "... a mission that is respectful of this Trinitarian mystery will be humble..... It is one thing to be aware of the privilege of having an experience of God's self-manifestation and to bear witness to it boldly and clearly. It is another thing to pretend to be an exclusive messenger of God and not to be attentive to God's continuing action in the world" (Ibid.).

dialogue. 'Humility' is applied only to the greatness of the mystery one possesses rather than to the question of its possession. Thus, even humility applied to the freedom of the Other seems vitiated by the certainty of delivering truth. In fact, to the clear statement "what is important is the relationship between God and this other", he cannot resist adding: " - and I am only a humble facilitator of this relationship". If Amaladoss's theories contain some weaknesses, his practical theology, however, is the product of one who has struggled for his ideals. Speaking for instance about 'Evangelization as Liberation', he is not afraid to denounce injustice and he urges Christians to take a clear stand in the world of 'politics';[35] his critique of colonial and neo-colonial missionary activity is equally explicit and forceful.[36]

The experience of the Indian Church is certainly close to the situation of the Church and missionary organisations in Bangladesh. The growth of the Christian population in Eastern Bengal was remarkably low between 1891 and 1931, decreased rapidly during the decade 1931-41, and rose sharply between 1941-51 (Roekaerts 1979: 26), due, most probably, to the greater influx of missionaries and the availability of funds which during subsequent decades increased still further, given the prosperity of the donating churches in the West. The first to draw attention to this in Bangladesh was the Bishop of Chittagong, Mgr. Joachim Rozario, who, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of his diocese, wrote in December 1977 a pastoral letter in which he advocated, to fulfil the requirements of a "local church", the advent of an economically and spiritually self-reliant, self- ministering and self-propagating community (Rozario 1977: 10-14). By denouncing those structures which made the church foreign and dependent on foreign funds, Mgr. Rozario urged the church to identify itself with the majority of the people of the country as the only possible way to reach economic self-reliance. Likewise, spiritual self-reliance was advocated by downplaying the role of the clergy and the religious, still in great part non-Bangladeshi, and by entrusting some work to the laity.[37]

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35 " The most striking thing about our world today is the poverty of the majority of humanity... Today we are realizing that the poor are not merely poor, but are made poor by unjust economic and political structures. A privatized, otherworldly religion may have become an alienating force. The media and other cultural forces may have created a spirit of dependence and resignation among the poor. The rich too become prisoners of structures that often they have not created but inherited. ... The division between the rich and the poor is not merely a problem among the nations, but also within each nation.... Proclaiming the gospel in this situation is to proclaim liberation - not merely economic and political, but also cultural and religious... Evangelization that takes such an integral approach cannot but have a political dimension..." (Ibid.: 9).

36 " With the end of the colonial era, missions no longer have the backing of the political power. One wonders whether the economic backing that many missions have even today is an unmixed blessing. In India, for example the church-institution has the image of unlimited resources compared to the Christian communities, which is largely poor. While much of this money goes to the poor through charitable institutions, schools, and the like, the church does project a "foreign" image. This could be one reason why its witness is not taken as seriously as it would like" (Ibid.).

37 " Unless the existing system of almost complete dependency on the clergy, creating a visible indifference and inactivity from the side of the laity, is reversed, it may be difficult to make the local Church self-ministering..... A self-propagating Church which uses institutions and projects for the benefit of the Christian communities is questionable in terms of evangelization. Only when the Church will be able to co-operate and work with non-Christians, for society at large, while maintaining her own identity, can the Church in Bangladesh claim to be self-propagating" (Roekaerts 1979: 34).

Structural change in the Church was urged by the 1978 National Seminar for bishops and priests,[38] when it questioned how Christianity could become a religion of Bangladesh, with its millions of 'voiceless victims of injustice'.[39] As a consequence, inculturation,[40] the role of the laity, and the struggle for justice for all without expecting conversion to Christianity in return,[41] were particularly emphasised.

Prior to the 'National Seminar', a sociological study[42] of the Catholic élite groups in Bangladesh[43] revealed that membership of the Church was viewed in terms of 'being' rather than 'belonging', and that social, democratic values were accepted within the institutional church.[44] The split between internalised values of Christians and their effective political commitment in society was also highlighted.[45] While 61% of the clergy saw numerous divisions within the parish, only little more than half of the laity considered the parishes divided on class, caste, racial and linguistic lines.[46] These views were indicative of the fact that "a large majority of Christians in Bangladesh seek their

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38 " ... We are aware that many of these movements and changes do not produce desired effects, that the Church and her members are still looked upon as foreign and alien to the culture and mentality of the people, and the Church is not sufficiently indigenized and prophetic" (*Statement of the National Seminar for Catholic Bishops and Priests of Bangladesh*, Dhaka 4-8th July, 1978: 4, § 6).
"Since we are considered by so many as a foreign Church in Bangladesh, we reflect on how we could become more local ..." (Ibid.: 8, § 15).

39 Echoing the spirit of renewal heralded by Vatican II and the new wave of theological reflection, especially in India (Fr. D.S. Amalorpavadass, Director of the Indian Biblical and Catechetical Centre of Bangalore, was the animator of the Seminar), the Statement reflected a new awareness of the Church: "It is her (church's) mission to bear witness to the world of the need for love and justice embodied in the Gospel message. If she alligns herself with the rich and the powerful of this world her prophetic witness to the poor and the oppressed is diminished" (Ibid.: 6, § 11).

40 " There is a need for a better and deeper understanding and assimilation of the various cultures existing in the country, especially the predominant Islamic culture and the minority tribal cultures. Sharing common concerns and needs, both spiritual and material, with the peoples of other faiths, we find a firm basis for dialogue with them" (Ibid.: 8, § 15).

41 ".... We hold out hope to them ['the marginal classes of society'] through the testimony of our genuine and disinterested service for them in Christ" (Ibid.: 7, §13).

42 Bouillard, C. & Murphy, P. M., *A Study of the Catholic Elite Groups in Bangladesh*, mimeo, n.d. (1974-76 c.). This study was to inquire into the 'options and attitudes' of these groups vis-à-vis society, politics, relation with non-Christians, cultural pluralism, ecclesiastical structures and institutions, adaptation of the church to a Bangladeshi way of life, and finally, the influence of Vatican II on the life of the Church. Questionnaires were sent to 191 clergy (123 answered), 380 religious sisters (214 answered) 585 laity (200 answered).

43 Under this heading, clergy (priests-brothers-seminarians), religious sisters , and lay leader were classified.

44 " First, Christianity and membership in the Church are seen as 'being' rather than 'belonging'. The Christian is seen as a person who has internalised Christian values expressed in social engagement in spite of a dichotomy seen between the religious and the secular, in contra-distinction to one who observes specific religious practices. Second, the introduction of social democratic values within the institutional church is widely accepted by all groups of respondents. It should be mentioned here also, that to the extent that these values and expectations are not realized in practice, the degree of conflict within the Church in the future will increase" (Ibid.: 35).

45 "Although the Catholic élite felt that involvement in what is fashionably conceptualized as 'community development' is acceptable in the realm of secular action, they become hesitant to start anything in the political sphere."
"Awareness of economic realities is not very evident among the hierarchy. The majority of Priests and Bishops seem to avoid any structural analyses, in as far as this would touch politics and disrupt the status quo. The Church in Bangladesh, by and large, tried to convey the good news without reading the signs of the times" (Roekaerts 1979: 30)

46 " If one recalls that 42% of the laity saw these divisions as willed by God, one can wonder how such divisions within the parish community can be eradicated so long as such religious legitimation underlies the reality...." This attitude, which in the long run favours the creation of ghettos, is also reflected in the desire expressed by the laity (73%) to maintain Catholic private schools which are not valued as the primary instrument for the education of children but as "insurance for the survival of Christianity in Bangladesh". (Bouillard & Murphy n.d. : 50).

identification as Christians through the institutions and to threaten the security they find in these institutions is to threaten the survival of Christianity". In its final chapter, the study questions whether the institutional Church in Bangladesh was 'an accultured minority' or rather a 'ghetto',[47] given the poor response to the adaptation of the Church to a Bangladeshi way of life, and the ineffective influence of Vatican II on changes. When later, in May 1980, the National Commission for Justice and Peace published a Document[48] describing the appalling condition of the country (Storgato 1985: 28) and urging Christians to take an active role in promoting change,[49] the Bishops (CBCB) remained hesitant and "did not feel like endorsing the Document and making it officially their own" (Storgato 1985: 28, note 26).

A short, enlightening article by Fr. William Slavin[50] points out that if there was any intention of establishing an "authentic local Church" in Bangladesh, then the reality of the three different groups which formed this Church should be taken into account. The three groups in question are: 1) the Catholics of Dhaka and Chittagong, who are the descendants of early Portuguese and 'Padroãdo' converts;[51] 2) those who converted from Baptist groups (Krishnagar and Jessore, 1860 c.), or from Anglican groups (Gaurnodi, Barisal);[52] 3) the tribal groups of North East India missionised by the Holy Cross missionaries (Mymensingh) and the PIME missionaries (Dinajpur).[53]

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47 " Without meaningful exchange with the greater society, the Church easily becomes a ghetto community, loses the power to influence the life of its people, and tends to work mainly for its own survival" (Roekaerts 1979: 31; cf. Rozario 1977: 9).

48 National Commission for Justice and Peace - Bangladesh, 1980. *Justice and Peace in Bangladesh* , Dhaka.

49 Four main areas of concern were sketched out: 1) At a socio-economical level problems such as over-population, malnutrition, high illiteracy, high death rate, landlessness, low income per capita, unemployment and under-employment, were pointed out. 2) At a political level it was noticed that power rested in the hands of a better-off élite who controlled government policies in their favour. 3) This situation of corruption was particularly felt in the legal and penal systems of the country where political prisoners were held without charge or trial, with inhuman and unjust treatment of arrested persons, who had no possibility of appeal and were at the mercy of corrupt and costly court procedures. 4) Discrimination of women, the handicapped, ethnic and minority groups was widespread.

50 Fr. Slavin, a priest from Glasgow Diocese, worked in Khulna between 1975-80 (Cf. Slavin, W., *Around Bangladesh*, Interpress, n.d.)

51 " It should be recognised that these Christians, now centred on the city of Dhaka, are for all practical purposes the Catholic Church in Bangladesh. They have provided so far all the five Bishops (plus another in West Bengal), the vast majority of religious, and almost all the educated laity" (Slavin 1979: 265). To this we have to add the formation of two new dioceses, Mymensing and Rajshai, where another two Dhaka priests were appointed as Bishops, and the presence of lay men managing directors of 'Caritas Bangladesh', who belong exclusively to this group.

52 " There are two very noteworthy features by which these Christians, although fully Bengali, are distinguished from those of Dacca. One is that their outcaste origins are recent, obvious and relevant in their social situation. The other is that not only are they relatively new Christians, they are even newer Catholics and many of their kin are still Protestant" (Slavin 1979: 266).
The splitting of Baptist and Anglican groups (the latter is now known as the "Church of Bangladesh"), has favoured the addition of other denominations and the creation of local varieties such as the '*Sahobhagita*' movement. "Catholics are also infected with this mentality and are not beyond threatening the priests that they will leave the church, particularly if another 'saheb' appears with fresh foreign funds" (Ibid.).
Slavin rightly pointed out that the Baradal/Satkhira mission is unique to this area in having no Protestants. According to him, the withdrawal of the PIME missionaries from Krishnagar and their decision to link up with the mission in Assam among the 'aboriginals' is an "eloquent testimony of the severe difficulties of missionary work in this area".

53 " The most obvious social feature of these missions is that they serve minorities who have been separated from their parent body by the 1947 partition. Many have already taken what seems a logical step and gone across the border. The question is perhaps not if but when the rest will leave. Meanwhile the Garos are the largest single identifiable group of Christians in the country" (Ibid.: 267).

The questions raised by Slavin in his conclusion, though addressing the problematic situation of the 1947 partition,[54] still remain mostly unanswered: "For not only are there at least three distinct types of community with very different histories but their perspectives for the future are also different and perhaps mutually exclusive."

Slavin's analysis helps us to situate the Khulna Catholics within the wider framework of the Bangladeshi Church, and to establish the relative amount of unity at a local level where, indeed, we can confirm the presence of three major groups: 1) the 'Dhaka Catholics' represented by the Bishop, the regional director of 'Caritas', the staff at the Major Seminary who train the Khulna priests, a number of nuns of that diocese, and the pressure of the 'hierarchical apparatus' springing from the 'old Christian communities'. 2) the former Protestants from Bhabarpara, Jessore and Faridpur, and 3) the Christians of Rishi origin. The latter seem to occupy in Khulna the same place reserved at a national level for the tribal groups who have more recently converted to Christianity. In fact, if the Khulna Christians are labelled "*Nuton Khristan*" (New Christians) by the Dhaka people, this is particularly true for the Rishi, to whom the "*Nuton*" is referred more in a derogatory fashion than in a chronological sense (in point of fact, some of them had converted earlier than many former Protestants).

In 1985, the CBCB presented a 'Pastoral Plan' for the Bangladeshi Church, based on outcomes of previous meetings,[55] and analysing "signs of great concern" and "signs of hope" both in church and society.[56] Among the pastoral priorities,[57] inculturation was seen as "an awareness of and immersion into the Bangladesh condition", appreciating the "natural religiosity of the people", widespread especially in the "village and simple mentality" of non-Christian religions.[58] The implementation of the Plan was intended to bring the church from an "infant stage" through the coming of age, to "the adult stage of local church.....".

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54 "Each of the three groups has been fractured to a greater or lesser extent by partition and today each of them has probably more contacts with people outside Bangladesh than they have with each other. Therefore, if there is a serious effort to have one local church then strenuous efforts have to be made to reverse many present tendencies. The burden will fall inevitably on the Dacca Christians to bring the other two groups into the main life of the church. In particular this means a wider awareness of the critical situation in which the tribals find themselves [see, *The Charge of Genocide* - Human Rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, Chittagong Hill Tracts Campaign, Amsterdam, 1986]. It also means a frank admission of the grim poverty of the Khulna and Faridpur Christians..... (Slavin 1979: 268).

55 The Pastoral Plan was inspired by the 1978 'Seminar', a month long theological renewal for all the bishops and priests in 1974, and a regional gathering of priests and religious in 1977.

56 Among the "sign of concern" are the "overwhelming hunger, misery, ignorance, injustice and oppression", indifference towards religion and moral values, various forms of tensions and divisions. This last point, bringing us back to the issue discussed above, underlines also divisions within the Church where "... we find a small number of the rich and educated and larger number of poor and destitute, the uneducated and illiterate. There are various ethnic and cultural groups. Among all of these a spirit of harmony and community needs to be developed and strengthened" (CBCB 1985: 7).

57 These are 1) Healing misery and oppression, 2) Communion and community building, 3) Sharing within the Church, 4) Inculturation, and 5) Formation of the Church's leadership.

58 " The vision of life of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and other religious traditions should be studied and reflected upon, both academically and through "dialogue of life", so that we can understand the mind of the majority of the people here. This will help us to create greater harmony in our relationship with them, and indicate how Christ may be better presented to and contemplated by them" (Ibid.: 22, §50).

Storgato (1986: 394-410),[59] commenting on the 'ethnic issues' raised by the Plan, returns to unresolved questions of a divided Christianity, imported from Europe,[60] and welcomes the approach to create not a uniformity but a "communion of communities", which "leaves much space for social, cultural and ethnic diversities to develop, confront and enrich each other, within the same Church". Whilst urging a political commitment from the Church,[61] Storgato himself raises many doubts on the capacity of this Church to 'immerse' itself into local cultures.[62] Further, he does not understand why the Church, in proclaiming the gospel "chooses the method 'witness of life - silent proclamation' as the more fitting to the Bangladeshi context", ignoring 'direct proclamation'. 'Silent proclamation and witness of life' as a considered choice is certainly to be recommended; however, I suspect that in this case it was more a matter of inconsistency and perhaps fear. In fact, two years after the Pastoral Plan was published, and despite recognising the "contemplative dimension of the faith",[63] "direct proclamation" seemed to prevail.[64]

This issue, as we will see, is particularly relevant to missionary presence and activity among the Rishi. Even recent criticisms made by some missionaries who would willingly work among the Rishi without seeking their 'conversion' seem to be answered by the need for proselytization carried out with a more 'serious' methodology.[65] All in all, one has the impression that the "contemplative dimension of the faith" and the struggle for justice are not sought *per se*, but with the intention of conquering "new members". This view is of course not shared by all pastoral agents in Bangladesh.

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59 Fr. Storgato is a Xaverian missionary, at that time working in Jessore as director of the National Catechetical Centre.

60 " Past history of Christianity in Bangladesh shows a strong tendency to division and fragmentation from its very start. This has been imported from and by the fragmented Christianity of Europe and it found suitable soil here in the plurisecular social stratification that no Buddhism nor Islam, nor Christianity could ever eradicate; they were instead affected by it.... In my opinion, this ethnic composition [of groups and sub-groups] stands as one of the main issues and challenges for and within Christianity" (Storgato 1986: 404).

61 " Eventually, a political choice by the Church will have to be taken, no matter how much and for how long she has been reluctant to do this in the past. Better if the choice is done by the base itself, and let us hope that it will find openness and support by the Church's leadership" (Ibid.: 405).

62 In fact, he deeply laments that the Pastoral Plan and all its previous drafts had been written in English first "and than translated into Bengali (and what a difficult, sometimes clumsy Bengali!)". His rhetorical questions reveal many of our queries, and bring to life "the important issue of communication", given that language is never neutral and its usage always involves 'political choice'(Ibid.: 406).

63 The "contemplative dimension of the faith" appears again in a later document, and popular religiosity once again rises to the surface: "In a country where popular religiosity is so widespread and roles of *pirs* and *gurus*, namely of holy men, are so prominent, people of other religions wish to see more signs of the contemplative experience of the Christian community, especially of its religious leaders" (BIMA 1988: 404).

64 " There are some minor groups in Bangladesh, especially those socially or religiously marginalized, who are responsive to the Gospel and the Church. The Church has the obligation to present Christian faith to them as an option for life. Much is being done in this field....." (Ibid.).

65 " Since the Church must wish that her members must become genuine Christians and open to others especially in areas where justice and peace is concerned, the preparation for these new members must be more thorough and intense than in former times" (Ibid.).

One of the last groups to join the missionary enterprise in Bangladesh, the American Maryknoll Fathers, represent a different approach to mission activity following Vatican II.[66] Positioned outside the parish-institution (Esselborn 1982: 11), and inspired by the life-style of Charles de Foucauld,[67] the aim of their presence among rural Muslims in no way points to 'conversion' but to witnessing the Gospel "from a base of powerlessness as the world understands power, money, influence, prestige".[68] This experience soon engendered friendship with the Muslim peasants,[69] understanding and encouragement from some[70] and much criticism from others within the Church who saw them as a threat.[71] For others again, this effort had witness value only for the individuals involved, since there was no point "to completely secularise oneself in a Muslim society...".[72] The need for 'new paths' of missionary presence was by no means confined to the Dhaka Diocese; in fact, those working outside the structure all over Bangladesh have gathered to form a research group to reflect upon "parallel ways of apostolate".[73]

Other events for the Bangladeshi Church were the Bishops' visits to the Pope. During one such visit in 1985, John Paul II encouraged them, although a small community, to bear witness to the Gospel through works of charity for the poor and dialogue with the non-Christian religions, and recommended stronger unity between dioceses. One Year later, in 1986, he visited Bangladesh on his way to Oceania, and again encouraged the Bishops to work for unity among their Christians. His visit

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66 Five of them reached the country in 1975 and, soon after a period of language training, four of them established themselves in Tangail, 60 miles Northeast of Dhaka. All had previous missionary experience in other countries before reaching Bangladesh.

67 C. de Foucauld lived a life of prayer and contemplation among the Tuareg in Morocco, without converting anybody, and preached the Gospel only through witness.

68 " That first day when I walked alone into the fields in Rosulpur..... I felt I was walking into an ocean of people, of Muslims, that I was putting myself into their hands. All I had to give was myself. No parish, no reputation, no official status like priesthood, no congregation, no skills useful in this 'sea'. I was simply a Christian trying to make the message of Jesus known through my life. I felt naked. They were looking at my bare Christianity....." (Venne 1982: 15).

69 ".... I guess my making many mistakes in the field made them sympathetic toward me, brought out the good in them as they helped me. I was no threat. Nor was I a person to be frowned on since I offered no material aid....." (Ibid.).

70 The Archbishop of Dhaka, Mgr. M. Rozario, under whose jurisdiction these missionaries work, recognises that 'the stagnant situation of the Church in Bangladesh' could benefit from this new presence: "Among the four of us Bishops we acknowledge that we've used traditional methods here for years. The Church is somewhat stagnant..... Maybe there is something lacking. Maybe the Maryknoll Fathers being in Tangail as they are, will have some results eventually" (*Mission Forum* 11, 1982: 38).

71 Fr. Zimmerman, Holy Cross missionary in Bangladesh since 1952, hoped that, despite the great deal of criticism they received at first, others will "take up the challenge and develop a positive approach to the Muslims.... Most of us have long been aware of the Muslim majority and what we would call a Muslim apostolate. But the Tangail Maryknollers are putting it in the forefront of our minds" (Interview with Fr. Zimmerman C.S.C., *Mission Forum* 11, 1982: 35).

72 " To live apart from a parish, with no parish obligations is seen by many of the local clergy as a waste of time. 'What are the Maryknollers doing there, just living among non-Christians?' they ask. The laity simply don't understand their simple life-style, for they've had no chance to see it before" (Interview with Br. D'Souza C.S.C., *Mission Forum* 11, 1982: 38).

73 Cf. Casey, A. 'Minutes: Complementary/Parallel Ways of Apostolate Meeting', Khulna, 19-20th. Nov. 1984, *XAK*, File 12.

had a positive impact and stirred enthusiasm for dialogue between Muslims and Christians.[74] This certainly helped ease the tension created during the early eighties when the Government exercised direct control on the importation of funds, personnel and services of the Church, but it did not prevent the amendment to the Constitution of the country, some years later, which declared Islam the "State religion". This was only the culmination of many previous steps taken by the then President Ershad who sought to retain power with the help of fundamentalists. The Catholic bishops and other Christian leaders who felt their own as well as other minorities threatened by this decision, shared the reaction of the opposition, who saw in this a departure from the secular nature of the Constitution.[75] With the advent of a new Government, in March 1991,[76] it was hoped these matters would be resolved.

The main event in the Khulna Diocese during this time is the advent of local clergy.[77] After the appointment in 1970 of a local Bishop, even though from Dhaka Diocese, the presence of local priests during the eighties and nineties is certainly destined to modify diocesan structures and policies.

c) New missionary policies of the Xaverians in Khulna[78]

Following missionary involvement in relief operations after Independence, the Xaverians feared losing sight of their specific role and of being perceived by their Christians and the Bangladeshi in general as well-organised foreign agents with power and means at their disposal. The First Regional

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74 Cf. *Bangladesh Observer* ' Editorial' , 27 Nov. 1986.

75 Cf. *The New Nation*, Dhaka, 4-6-1988.

76 On March 20, 1991, Begum Khaleda Zia, leader of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) was sworn in as Prime Minister of the country.

77 Despite their good intentions of establishing a local clergy, as part of the policy of *"plantatio ecclesiae"*, the Xaverians had little success in this field. Back in 1965, the former Bishop Mgr. Battaglierin lamented the lack of vocations to priesthood. One of the reasons given was that the seminarians, once ordained priests, would not agree to work among the Rishi: "Our first and most promising seminarian [most probably the Anglo-Indian Lawrence De], extremely intelligent and caring, has left for this very reason....."(Battaglierin 1965: 345).
Soon after the War of Independence, the present Bishop, Mgr. D'Rozario, set up a Junior Seminary in Khulna and in March, 1972, 16 seminarians took up residence there. The first local priest from the Diocese, Fr. Victor Boiragi (Shehalabunia Parish), who studied in Rome, was ordained priest there by Pope Paul VI on January 6, 1973. The following year Fr. Alphred Punno Biswas (Khulna Parish), was ordained by the Bishop on December 1st, 1974. Only ten years later, in 1984, were the next diocesan priests to be ordained by the Bishop (Frs. Philip Sujit Sarkar from Shehalabunia and Joachim Mondal from Simulia parish).

78 This topic will be discussed mainly through written material produced over the years by the Xaverians as a result of meetings, reports, letters and communications. Priority will be given to the Documents of the various Regional Chapters celebrated every three-four years since 1975. They usually represent a time of evaluation of the past period and one of planning for the future; in this sense, not everything expressed there describes what happened but gives guidelines. Other important meetings at Regional level are the Monthly meetings and the Annual Assembly, which also contain a revision and a planning section. On the occasion of both the Chapters and the Annual Assemblies, the Regional Superior presents his own personal report of evaluation and planning. Furthermore, the Regional Superior is asked to present a report on the Region at the General Chapter of the Institute, celebrated every six years, and at the Conference of Major Superiors, celebrated with the same frequency in between General Chapters. Usually, but not exclusively, some representatives of the General Direction of the Institute are present at the celebration of Regional Chapters and on other special occasions. Their reports too will be taken into account. One of the important features of the Regional Chapters is that of electing the Regional Superior and his four Councillors: all of them, in principle, remain in charge for a three-year period.

Chapter celebrated during March-April 1975[79] addressed itself to this and other issues by proposing radical changes in both missionary activity[80] and social development.[81] These proposals were to be the subject of endless debate in Xaverian meetings during the coming years, showing both good-will towards change and ambiguity in implementing changes. It was recognised that missionary presence was undergoing a crisis.[82] Their identity as "men of God", overshadowed by their social activity, was to be restored by sharing a life of poverty with the people, adopting the principle of 'inculturation' through translation of the Christian message into local terms,[83] opening the Christian ghetto[84] to establish dialogue with the rest of society,[85] and recovering the religious dimension of their vocation. It soon became clear that sharing with the poor and 'incarnation' into a local milieu had to be assessed in more realistic terms[86] and, given the foreign image projected by the local church, the missionaries felt the need to adopt a new 'creative and critical' role,[87] with the economic power of both the Xaverians and the diocesan institution coming under scrutiny. Not only were individual missionaries

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79 The Chapter itself was preceded by a long period of preparation through questionnaires, discussion groups and committees. The Bishops' Synod on Evangelization, the Documents of Vatican II and those of the 9th Xaverian General Chapter ("The Xaverian Institute in today's Church", 1971), stimulated the reflection of themes relevant to the Xaverians in Bangladesh. The final draft of the Chapter Documents ("Presence and Service of the Xaverians in Bangladesh") deal with 1) the history of the country, its socio-economic situation, and its cultures and religions; 2) a brief history of Christianity in Khulna and the work carried out by the Xaverians to date in education, development, health care and pastoral activity; 3) a discussion on the motivations, options and methods of missionary presence; and 4) the role of the missionary community in the country and in the local church of Khulna.

80 "..... We think that we have tried to preserve the status quo by taking advantage of the indigenous natural religious sentiment, which we have directed towards rigid, European, and sometimes alienating forms of Christian life....." (*Presenza e Servizio dei Saveriani in Bangladesh*, Atti del I Capitolo Regionale, mimeo, Roma 1975: 50).

81 "... Our activity in the various fields of this sector should be characterised by discretion and humility, together with a certain efficiency which should, however, avoid forcing a course of action superior to the real possibilities of the Bangladeshi people, who are already too upset and disorientated by cultural and economic foreign interferences...." (Ibid.: 51)

82 While "the old missionary has lost his enthusiasm, the young one is not yet sure of his own identity" (Ghirardi, O. [Regional Superior], Letter to the Xaverians in Khulna, 26 -03-1976, *XAK*, File 11 - 12).

83 The 'impressive structure' of the Church had been imported from outside, foreign values had been imposed over local values, conformism to the doctrine had prevented personal responsibility and creativity, allowing as a result a heavy formalism (*Presenza e Servizio dei Saveriani in Bangladesh*, Atti del I Capitolo Regionale, mimeo, Roma 1975: 50).

84 The Christians themselves had been brought up in a traditional and conservative way "outside the anthropological context indicated by Vatican II". This meant that a process of re-Christianization was to take place through proper catechism training and catechumenate and helped by local leaders and catechists.

85 Among the practical conclusions, the missionaries decide to dedicate their time not only to the Christian community, but to the Bangladeshi 'human' community at large, and to deeper dialogue with its cultures and religions. The suggestion that some missionaries would dedicate themselves full time to the accomplishment of this task was not immediately implemented, but future developments of this kind find here their origin.

86 "..... It will never be possible for us to adopt the life style of a common Bangladeshi man. However, the gift of our life, our work side by side with the poor and the method adopted in our activity seem to us to express our will to share the life of the poor. We are still left with the problematic ambiguity "money-power" which has negative ramifications for our work and our identity" (Tedesco, S, '*Relazione della Q. Regione del Bangladesh al X° Capitolo Generale*', *Vita Nostra* 1977: [7-15] 9).

87 " ..... Our role will be one of creativity and critique. We think it our duty to favour in an irreversible way a real self-sufficiency of the local church so that we can give a subsidiary service. To achieve this, it is imperative to give more responsibility to the laity. It is time for us to progressively abandon key-roles in the diocese so as to encourage the local church to make its own choices" (Ibid.: 12).

called to 'personal conversion'[88] but this was extended to the conversion of sinful church structures. This attitude extended to the achievement of justice, the formation of lay leaders, a renewed commitment to breaking up the Christian ghetto,[89] the renunciation of power by the missionaries,[90] and the revision of educational methods.[91]

Some years later, missionary participation in the local church's power structure was still denounced[92] and as late as 1987, the Superior General was urging the Xaverians to abandon the "power of money" and their role as managers in favour of being 'prophets and *gurus*'.[93] Financial issues became an increasingly discussed topic, but the call of the 1985 4th Regional Chapter[94] for a more radical attitude towards a life of poverty in keeping with the situation of the country, and the abandonment of everything that could compromise an effective evangelical witnessing, remained unanswered.[95] Furthermore, in 1987, when a Regional Council for Economic Affairs (CORAE) was created to establish centralised economic control, some missionaries reacted by advocating financial independence.[96] The decision to hand over financial power to the Bishop did not prevent some from

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88 " Before going to others and giving, we should experience something within ourselves. We ourselves should first start the journey of conversion...." (Casey, A., 'Pastoral Work in the Diocese', Minutes of Priests' Meeting on Pastoral Programme for Khulna Diocese, Boyra 9-11 June, 1978, *XAK*, vol. 11-12).

89 " The idea of ghetto: should our Christians live segregated, separated from the mainstream of the people? Should we not encourage the break-up of the *para* mentality, more integration into the social fabric of the Muslim society wherever possible?...." (Ibid.).

90 "... The idea of teaching them (laity) to have a commitment in the parish - but at the same time this calls for us to renounce our formerly undisputed power to rule - the 'Saheb' mentality has to be broken....." (Ibid.).

91 ".... Do we lay much stress on personal achievement?..... Do these students become alienated from their environment or do they manage to integrate? Are we creating misfits? Are our schools isolated from the life of the villages? Do they contribute anything to the progress of the village? Is there not the danger of forming a class of young people who refuse to work on the land and want only office jobs with no sweat or dirty hands, an élite selfishly concerned for its own private interests and with no thought for the progress of the people? Should our emphasis not be more that of teaching self-help, rather than the pursuit of European style academic qualifications? Is our work in the schools predominantly oriented to the privileged 'few' who can afford it?....." (Ibid.).

92 " We are, furthermore, aware that we ourselves are working within a power framework, choosing a way of life that is linked to a privileged status, with regard to the richness of means at our disposal" ('*Documenti del II Capitolo Regionale del Bangladesh, Aprile 1979*', *Notiziario Saveriano*, June 1980: 68).

93 "..... In a setting like yours it is not the missionary 'manager' who is the one to conquer people for God, but the prophet, the witness of God (the *guru*). For a long time now, you yourselves have denounced the ambiguity of a more organisational and less spiritual type of presence; nevertheless, the impression to an outsider is that we are characterised by the power of money and means and too little by the strength of the Gospel which is mainly simplicity, poverty, detachment, contemplation and concern for the other...." (Ferrari, G., 'Relazione conclusiva della Visita di P. Gabriele Ferrari, Superiore Generale, Alla Regione Saveriana del Bangladesh', 24-2/20-3 1987, *XAK*, File s.n.).

94 Cf. '*Documenti e Norme del IV Capitolo dei Saveriani in Bangladesh*', Khulna 11-15 March, 1985, *XAK*, file 11-12.

95 "A subtle criticism can be noticed among us about the very personal way each one of us is using the money in his work and relief activities" (Rigali, G. 'Some ideas for re-thinking our economic administration and religious poverty', April 1986, *XAK*, File 11-12).

96 The availability of funds through embassies, organisations and associations to finance extensive projects risked "dragging us into initiatives and projects and, being absorbed in them, we would lose the real sense and style of our presence and action, and choose a 'quicker' method rather than one of growth into adulthood....." (Rigali, G. 'Relazione del Regionale - Assemblea Regionale Annuale, 27-28 Feb. / 16-17 Mar. 1987', *XAK*, File 11-12).

pursuing a 'comfortable' life style or perpetrating financial irregularities. In short, there was a deep incoherence in thinking about economic policy.[97]

It had apparently not been sufficient for the missionaries to embark on a new style of presence, adopted by some in opposition to the traditional structure of parish-run missions. These "New Paths" of activity (*Vie Nuove*) seemed to be born out of frustration at the results of the 'old structures': many converts "came from groups where proper religion was not allowed (and) were still living at the margin of social and religious life".[98] Taking "their social and religious level" seriously, some missionaries abandoned the parish structure and started living among the people, both Christians and non-Christians. The Rishi were seen as the ideal addressees and receivers of these 'new paths',[99] and whilst every effort was made not to contrapose the two styles, constant opposition came from those involved in parochial and diocesan activities and from the Bishop himself who seemed more concerned to protect and to expand his Christian flock.[100] Those promoting the 'new paths' had to negotiate endlessly the acceptance of their 'charisma'[101] as 'people sent to the non-Christians' with the Bishop,[102] who regretted the insistence on this charisma "to create a counter power-centre with the intention of carrying out activities which were not properly diocesan".[103]

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97 Rigali, G. '*Relazione del Regionale alla Assemblea Annuale - Regione del Bangladesh*', May 1989, *XAK*, File s.n.

98 " They still remain people of 'no-religion'. They accepted few external things. Instead of themselves conforming to Christianity, they conformed Christianity to themselves..... They want us for the security they get from our presence, for the help we give them, for administering some sacraments and presiding over their rites, their *bicar*, etc...We want to instruct and prepare them, they only want the sacraments. We want them to be independent, self-reliant, they want our help and relief. We want to establish a dialogue with Muslims and Hindus, they want us to be their priests alone...." (Storgato, M. 'Local Church and Catechism training', Minutes of Priests' Meeting on Pastoral Programme for Khulna Diocese, Boyra 9-11 June, 1978, *XAK*, File 12).

99 " We stress that the Rishi, as representatives of the poor, oppressed and marginalised, who are the first with the right to hear the Liberating Word, are privileged to be the focus (*sono il luogo privilegiato*) of our efforts in the Diocese of Khulna" ('*Documenti III Capitolo Regionale*' Khulna, Marzo 1982, *Notiziario Saveriano* (Numero Speciale - 228A) Roma, May 1982: 3).

100 Tedesco, S, '*Relazione della Q. Regione del Bangladesh al X° Capitolo Generale*', *Vita Nostra* 1977: 9.

101 The word 'charisma' had been used every time there was conflict in the interpretation of the Contract with the Bishop: "The Contract with the Bishop was the last official act of the 2nd Chapter. It was signed but each of the two parties continues its own way, each one interpreting things from his point of view. There is, therefore, a silent agreement of disharmony which is, as far as possible, smoothed over" (Tedesco, S. '*Relazione del Superiore al III Capitolo Regionale*' Khulna, March 1982, *XAK*, File 11-12).

102 " We believe that diversification of works will greatly benefit the local Church. We are aware of the delicate moment the local Church is facing with the Government. We will, therefore, with the help of our Bishop, try to be wise and prudent, bearing in mind that our goal should not always be aimed directly at so-called 'conversion'. We are not claiming independence which sounds heretical (*Mutue Relationes* § 22) although *Lumen Gentium* gives us a certain exemption(n. 45), the only humble request is to be permitted and encouraged to follow our vocation and the Holy Spirit" (Tedesco, S. 'A few considerations upon being a religious missionary Society within the local Church in Bangladesh', Khulna 10-11-1980, *XAK*, File 11-12).
"The Bishop's position is: first come the Christians then, if there is time, also the non-Christians. Our position should be: first come the non-Christians, and the Christians themselves should be united and prepared as a missionary and witnessing community" (Tedesco, S. '*Relazione del Superiore al III Capitolo Regionale*', Khulna, March 1982, *XAK*, File 11-12).

103 Tedesco, S. '*Relazione -Assemblea Annuale, Gennaio 1983*', *XAK*, File 11-12.
"... [the Bishop] was of the idea that everything should happen within the mission compound or at least in one of its corners, so that everything brings the seal of Christianity which expands from a centre" (Tedesco, S. '*Relazione della Regione Saveriana del Bangladesh al XI Capitolo Generale*', 1983, *XAK*, File 11-12).

Within the missionary community the 'New Paths' were criticised as a dissolution of communitarian commitment, a private enterprise of individuals enjoying too much freedom, a failure to serve the local church and fulfil the contract with the Bishop, and a lack of clear policy.[104] Whether it was the lack of clear policy, or the personality of those involved, or different views of Church and mission theology,[105] the 'new paths' were pushed into an early crisis. Indeed, all these reasons might have contributed to subverting a process which had only just begun. The spirit of change, however, was spreading and even a handful of missionaries was sufficient to keep it alive. Nevertheless, many sought clarification on these activities and on the tensions between the Bishop and the Superior, pointing out that the Xaverians should remain under the Bishop's authority and that the new paths could not prosper outside diocesan rule.[106]

When the Diocesan and Xaverian administrations were separated in 1986, some urged that the Xaverians should be allowed to continue promoting the 'New Paths' and appealed again to their charisma and Constitutions to defend their freedom of action.[107] The intensity of discussion, however, did not diminish since the Xaverians were now proposing a "phasing out" of their contribution to diocesan budget and personnel, to be programmed over a fixed number of years.[108] These as well as other interventions in the debate[109] show that whilst, on the one hand, there is evidence of a clear conviction and a sincere commitment to recognising "the difference between 'the Kingdom of God' and the particular Church of Khulna",[110] on the other, the Xaverians, though handing over money to the Bishop, seemed eager to dictate the conditions of this transaction, thus keeping a share of power. Though warning the missionaries against the temptation of imposing their views and of creating

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104 Tedesco, S. '*Relazione del Regionale al II Capitolo: Triennio 1976-79*', *XAK*, File 11-12; Tedesco, S. '*Relazione del Superiore al III Capitolo Regionale' Khulna, Marzo 1982*, *XAK*, File 11-12; Valoti, L. '*Relazione Incontro di Gennaio 9/10, 1984*' *XAK*, File 11-12; Alberton, A. '*Riflessioni in vista del Capitolo Regionale*', *XAK*, File 11-12.

105 "Some have asserted that there are two visions of Church among us, the one of the Bishop, the other of the Superior. We lament the lack of a common guideline given by the Bishop. We ask for a proper Vicar General in charge of pastoral matters and distinct from the diocesan administrator... The Bishop says that there are many directives, but we do not obey them...." (Tedesco, S. '*Relazione del Superiore al IV Capitolo Regionale del Bangladesh*', 1985, *XAK*, File 11-12).

106 Casey, A. 'Monthly Meeting 09-04-1985, Khulna', *XAK*, File 11-12.

107 " It is not necessary to pass the funding for the 'Vie Nuove' to the Bishop, as he has little interest in working among the Non-Christians and is largely preoccupied with the minority Christian Community in the Diocese of Khulna" (Casey, A. 'Annual Regional Assembly Minutes, 29-04-1986 (2nd Day) - Khulna', *XAK*, File 11-12).

108 "... The giving of a "blank cheque" to the Diocese without a clear commitment on the part of the Diocese to plan its financial intervention according to clear cut priorities, would be a backward step for the Xaverians to take..... We need to discover the amount of Xaverian contribution in the ordinary budget of each parish or institution, in order to begin to programme a planned withdrawal, beneficial both for the local clergy and the local church...." (Ibid.).

109 " Whenever dialogue with the Bishop is entered into, we know that behind this dialogue there is the community of Xaverians who wish to implement a certain policy and a certain financial choice."
" There is the danger that the Bishop will construe our new economic policy as an attempt by the 'Xaverian bloc' to deny him his autonomy in the running of the diocese" (Ibid.).

110 This distinction, proposed in this case by one missionary, will increasingly give a different theological and methodological foundation to the Xaverians working in Khulna, as we will see later.

tension, the Superior General urged them to continue pursuing new paths of presence and dialogue,[111] becoming thus a stimulus for those traditional ways of presence in need of renewal.[112] However, since the main focus of this type of presence was not 'direct evangelization', the authority of a 'priestly role' had to be replaced by a committed Christian life.[113]

An important issue discussed for the first time at the 4th Regional Chapter (1985) was the ever-increasing presence of local clergy in parish and diocesan activities and the need to co-operate with them. Whilst in the Ist and 2nd Chapters (1975/1979) the missionaries had lamented that the lack of local clergy required them to carry out the pastoral and administrative work of the diocese, now they felt the burden of providing proper pastoral initiation for young priests.[114] In fact, as part of a "phasing out" programme whereby they were only "temporary substitutes",[115] the missionaries felt the need to share with the local clergy not only money but also authority and responsibility.[116] But when the issue on local Xaverian vocations was raised, the missionaries' capacity to live with Bangladeshis was questioned, given the difficulties they encountered living in community with local clergy. According to the Superior, this relationship was not 'very serene',[117] with the Xaverians still holding power and economic independence.[118]

Nevertheless, the missionaries could not help recognising that, despite the lack of objectives and the formulation of an effective pastoral plan, the Church in Khulna presented hopeful signs of maturity,

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111 These were considered by him "the field in which we can measure the truth and authenticity of our service to the local Church".

112 Though the General Superior assured the Xaverians that the New Paths had the full support of the General Direction, he urged the missionaries not to consider them as the personal interests of a few but as activities fully recognised by the Region and the Diocese.

113 " It seems clear that this 'authority' cannot derive from economic power or managerial status. It will then spring from an authentic Christian life, based on God and contemplation, and from a lasting charity found in the Christian Mystery....." (Ferrari, G., *'Relazione conclusiva della Visita di P. Gabriele Ferrari, Superiore Generale, Alla Regione Saveriana del Bangladesh'*, 24-2/20-3, 1987).

114 ".... the fact that we can have at our disposal funds which seem almost unlimited and use them with very personal criteria, cannot but create in them [young diocesan priests] either a reaction of disgust because this will never be possible for them, or the illusion that they also one day will have available the same amount of power and money" (Rigali, G. 'Some ideas for re-thinking our economic administration and religious poverty', April 1986, *XAK*, File 11-12).

115 In 1988, a new idea, going against official decisions, was aired by the Superior, Fr. Rigali: apparently, the earlier intention to retreat gradually from parishes, was supplanted by the presumed desire of the local clergy to participate in the 'new paths'. Hence, the missionaries were no longer the 'pioneers' - but were asked to remain within diocesan institutions as dynamic missionary animators - and the local clergy would achieve a missionary spirit, proper to every local Church. Long-term, however, this proved untenable since while the local clergy continued operating at institutional levels, the missionaries working in the 'new paths' struggled to keep their activities going.

116 Rigali, G. 'Some ideas for re-thinking our economic administration and religious poverty', April 1986, *XAK*, File 11-12.

117 Cf. Bi-monthly Xaverian Meeting (4th Dec. 1986), *XAK*, File 12.

118 "All you need do is look at our budgets!" (Rigali, G. *'Relazione del Regionale - Assemblea Regionale Annuale,* 27-28 Feb. 16-17 Mar. 1987', *XAK*, File 12).

showing a new vitality with an increase in local clergy. The missionary role was rapidly changing and they were invited to accept the challenge of an "uncomfortable vocation":

> ..... The Local Churches both at home and in 'mission countries' are now well aware of their role and responsibilities: we belong to them both, and our role is one of service and stimulus, 'without power' in both and 'guests' in both. If it is true that the 'challenging prophets' are generally troublesome for institutions and societies in which they live, then we have accepted an 'uncomfortable' vocation from God, and we are taking this on board.....[119]

A parallel issue discussed with equal intensity during the last decade was the feasibility of recruiting Bangladeshi Xaverian vocations.[120] Before embarking on such a venture, the General Direction laid down two pre-requisites: 1) the ability of the Xaverians to live with Bangladeshis (their difficulties in communities with local Clergy seemed to invalidate this), and 2) the need for the missionaries' life-style and activities to become more 'Bangladeshi'.[121] It was the practical feasibility of these requirements and not a theoretical disagreement which was crucial, but some suggested that a "missionary conversion" was needed and, as this was not programmable, one could only hope for better times.

Missionary conversion was, however, not on the agenda, and the assembly voted against initiating local recruitment:[122] though some maintained that "... this would compel us to convert ourselves", others recognised that they were "still far too 'Italian'..." .[123] This position was taken as a prototype by those who did not yet advocate local Xaverians, but it also brought about an awareness in the rest of the community of the need to pave a way towards 'acculturation',[124] unquestionably overdue.[125] The unwillingness to recruit Bangladeshi vocations, was regarded by the Superior General not as a victory but as a sign of the poor health of the community: it was necessary to renew missionary presence in

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119 Rigali, G. '*Relazione della Regione del Bangladesh*', XII *Capitolo Generale* 1989, *XAK*, File s.n.

120 The '1985 IV Regional Chapter' supported the proposal that the Xaverians should accept local vocations and a commission was soon established to prepare a programme to this end.

121 This was discussed at the last bi-monthly meeting of 1986 (4th Dec.) when Fr. Bernacchi, in charge of presenting this topic, read a letter of the General Direction to the assembly.

122 The final result expressed in a vote was 7 in favour, 1 abstention and 23 against -out of 31 voters.

123 ".... We are still far too 'Italian'.... and they would be new-born Xaverians with too western a mentality; which 'model' could we give them? ours with 'clear and distinct' [Cartesian] ideas? or the Bangladeshi 'maybe' and 'I don't know'? ..... The few local priests would feel even more a minority and victims of our extra economic and numeric power....." ('Relazione dell' Assemblea Annuale - Regione del Bangladesh', 27-2-1986, *XAK*, File 11-12).

124 A series of new terms had been coined during this period especially in missionary terminology referring to the approach/exchange to different cultures. Thus, while 'inculturation' was defined, broadly speaking as "the presentation of the evangelical message and its values in terms of any given culture....", 'acculturation' was "the scientific approximation of an individual to a given culture. This happens when an individual bearer of a culture, enters into a direct and continuous contact with another culture with the intention of knowing and assimilating it" (Cf. Maiello, G. '*L'Operatore dell'Evangelizzazione e la Cultura*' - *Corso di aggiornamento per Missionari rientrati dalla Missione* - mimeo n.d., *XAK*, File 11-12).

125 When the 1987 Annual Assembly, after much deliberation, decided to drop the subject for a couple of years from official debate - the proposal was passed with a majority of 21 out of 31 voters - the Superior General, Fr. Ferrari, urged to express his opinion on the matter, pointed out that both in Bangladesh and in Sierra Leone the Xaverians had not yet started to move towards 'acculturation'.

order to rectify unfavourable value judgements of the Bangladeshis, since relationship with them had become almost impossible.[126] A decision to promote local Xaverians was eventually reached in 1991, but issues regarding a "missionary conversion" to less western ideas and values still remain unresolved and it will be for the first Bangladeshi Xaverians to assess the results of their own choice.

Considering the time spent discussing these topics and the quantity of written material the Xaverians produced in search of viable options in their missionary enterprise, one is not surprised at the ambiguities and frustrations this generated. At the same time, this process was to go some way to overcome the 'individualism' which had often characterised missionary activity. Despite affirmations to the contrary,[127] missionary training had in the past aimed at producing 'lone heroes', whose self-reliance in all aspects of life became paramount, and though after Vatican II the accent was put on creativity and charisma, these tended to be subordinate to community life. The continual individual/community opposition, as well as the missionary/religious community opposition, seem to rest on tenets and values favoured at a structural level of missionary organisation which is not ready to free itself from the Cartesian "*cogito*" and the metaphysics of the Self that sustain it. Moreover, when community is invoked in this setting, especially when linked to 'faith', it is usually a camouflage for regimentation rather than a free association of individuals with a common goal. A solution to these problems will not emerge from harking back to a 'lost equilibrium' or discovering new formulae of presence which will only repeat the errors of the past unless the Other is moved to the centre of concern.

The "Kingdom of God", a concept increasingly popular among missionaries, was meant to aid the Xaverians to renounce individual kingdoms in favour of building the Kingdom,[128] and to move from ecclesiocentrism to theocentrism. Whatever has been achieved in this direction always points, however,

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126 "... I think there is too great a paternalism on one side and too great a distance on the other... We must believe, against every proof to the contrary, that we are able to establish a communion with the Bangladeshis: this is a concrete way to live the solidarity, sharing and incarnation of which we speak a great deal..." (Ferrari, G., '*Relazione conclusiva della Visita di P. Gabriele Ferrari, Superiore Generale, Alla Regione Saveriana del Bangladesh*', 24-2/20-3 1987).

127 Presenting an overview of the past history of the Xaverians in Bangladesh, the Superior Fr. Rigali takes a simplistic approach to the period prior to 1971, when, according to him, there was no tension between the Xaverians and the local Church, and all the missionaries "marched as good soldiers, orderly and obedient". The tensions, it would seem, started during the following period, 1971-1976, when, working towards re-habilitation and development, the Xaverians had problems with the local Bishop, a man "less secularised and less socially minded" than the missionaries themselves. Between 1976 and 1985 the Xaverians were committed to developing 'new paths' of missionary approach and the tensions then crystallised not only with the Bishop but also within the community of missionaries. From 1985 onwards these activities evolved and progressed further, according to Fr. Rigali, who took the opportunity to point out once again that, after Vatican II, by accentuating the primacy of individuality, charisma and creativity over structure, rules and organisation, the Xaverians were running the risk of falling prey to individualism, instability, discontinuity and tensions within the community itself (Cf. Rigali, G. '*Relazione della Regione del Bangladesh*', XII Capitolo Generale 1989, *XAK*, File s.n.).

128 " Nobody was called to establish a small kingdom, ... but all are called to establish the Kingdom.... This vision is slowly being accepted, but for now impatience, misunderstanding and separate paths are still a reality among us" (Rigali, G. '*VII Conferenza dei Superiori Regionali - Relazione del Bangladesh*', Tavernerio-Como, 17-28 Agosto 1987, *Notiziario Saveriano*, N° 290, 1987: [485-495] 491).

towards a renewed awareness of the Other's proximity.[129] The introduction of this concept into official documents certainly indicated a desire for a different approach to missionary activity at a larger community level. Its implementation at a purely theoretical and theological level supposed the overcoming of the narrow ecclesiology which had dominated past missionary activity when the Church had become the main principle of action and the goal in which this action found its fulfilment. At the same time, even though the 'God' preached by the Christians was directly related to the experience of Christ, a door was opened to 'revelations' of a God other than the Christian one.[130] This meant a re-orientation of the Church as part of the Kingdom of God, rather than its only culmination, an opening to the Other and the acceptance of its experience of God as valid, together with the abandonment of ideas of 'exclusiveness' of God in relation to Christian supremacy. In other words, God, even the 'Christian God', could not be monopolised only by Christians, and his revelation went far beyond the narrow boundaries of the Church.[131] The traditional view that the Kingdom of God coincided with the Church receded and the new approach implied quite different choices in day-to-day life. But these would take time to effect. Some Xaverians in Bangladesh, at this point in time, were humble enough to recognise the magnitude of these statements and their own inadequacy in bringing them to fruition.[132]

The most surprising result seems that, in their effort to establish a dialogue with the Other through inculturation and sharing,[133] the missionaries were 'learning' from the Other to reinterpret their own faith and religious vocation:[134] the very first step involved recognising alterity within the missionary community itself and encouraging the missionaries to practise the sharing they preached.[135]

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129 ".... We need to start from scratch re-thinking our religious life, and how we can 'inculturate/incarnate' it in a Bangladesh context, on how we can transform our religious community into a free, poor, dialogic, jointly responsible community, which is meaningful for all, Christians and non-Christians....." (Ibid.: 489).

130 " The Bangladeshi man often misunderstands us since our presence risks not transmitting those values we wish to communicate. The proper values of the Bangladeshi culture, seen as 'seeds of the Word' and signs of the Kingdom's presence, demand further effort of awareness and assimilation on our part..." ('*Documenti del V° Capitolo Regionale del Bangladesh*' Khulna, March 1988, *XAK*, File 11-12).

131 " The Local Church is not and does not exist for its own purpose, but for the service of the larger community of the Bangladeshi people where God is present and active: He calls us here (in the midst of these people) to provide an answer to the urgent and dramatic problems in which millions find themselves....." (Ibid.).

132 "... Trying to understand our identity in the new circumstances of the mission, the question is in which ways our presence-work in Bangladesh can still remain relevant. The old formulas no longer work. We have a real crisis on our hands here. Modern society is asking us for new and more relevant ways in our work and presence. What are they? How can we find them out?....." ('Minutes of the Xaverian Meeting', Khulna 14-9-1988, *XAK*, File 11-12).

133 "As foreigners we are conscious of belonging to a different culture from that in which we are inserted and, aware that Bangladeshi culture cannot ever be completely ours, we are asked to avoid any kind of easy comparison with our cultures of origin and any sort of imitation that goes against an authentic process of 'acculturation', to keep as an ongoing commitment the study of the language, and to value peoples, means and occasions in order to understand constantly at a deeper level the cultural reality in which we move and act...." ('*Documenti del V° Capitolo Regionale del Bangladesh*' Khulna, March 1988, *XAK*, File 11-12).

134 " Sharing: becoming humble companions of a journey, as brothers more than as teachers and fathers....." ('*Sintesi sulla Riflessione della Regione del Bangladesh sulla Tematica del Capitolo Generale 1989*' 9 Nov. 1988, Khulna, *XAK*, File 12).

135 Rigali, G. '*Relazione della Regione del Bangladesh*', XII Capitolo Generale 1989, *XAK*, File s.n.

The utopian dream in search of missionary identity seems far from over.[136] The experience of missionary activity, despite all the fixity of dogmas and values, is rapidly changing and adapting to a new reality: the missionary no longer struggles to be the lone hero who leaves his home country to die in distant foreign lands, but to be, "a brother among brothers", aware of his many shortcomings, and ready to share the same path of life with others. It is this 'Other', especially the poor, the non-Christian, the once 'unfaithful', who helps shape a new image of missionary community and helps it to re-discover its role of 'prophecy' and its "capacity to value the 'different' ".[137] The world has become smaller, not only for the missionary; many can easily reach distant lands and enter into contact with other cultures and peoples, but the missionary, or the community of missionaries, if they want to be faithful to the standards they have set for themselves, should recognise, both at home and in the field, the alterity of the Other as "beyond being and comprehension" .[138]

d) New style of presence among the Rishi

Whilst during the first two decades the Rishi-missionary relationship was characterised by the personal commitment of those closely involved with them, during this last period this commitment concerns the whole missionary community. Nevertheless, it seems that official decisions did not correspond to the situation on the ground. Dedication to the non-Christian Rishi as representatives of the poor and destitute was founded on a more committed missionary presence, but was also motivated by dissatisfaction with the low standards of Rishi Christians, with the work conducted among them, and with the tensions created by continuous Rishi dependence. By initiating this new activity which would supposedly both challenge parish work and serve as a stimulus for its reassessment, the missionaries intended to avoid past errors, giving more space to pre-evangelization and postponing indefinitely a potential 'aggregation' to Christianity. This position leaves the missionaries with no strict obligation towards the Rishi, who for their part, especially those who would 'convert' to Christianity, are placed in an ambiguous state of indefinite 'suspension'. At the same time the Christian Rishi, who initially felt betrayed by the missionaries, were forced to accept that 'mission' did not stop at the 'mission compound' and that resources were to be shared. Later, these Christians, especially those who had gone to great lengths to separate themselves from their group, when required

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136 "..... A man in dialogue with the great religions, his social action based on non-violence and a deep spirituality; a man of the Church but with the Kingdom of God in mind, able to lose himself amidst the masses to make them develop, but without losing either his hope or his own identity, and capable of patient action and perseverance for long-term results....." (Rigali, G. '*VI Conferenza Dei Superiori Regionali: Relazione del Bangladesh*', *Notiziario Saveriano*, (269 A) Oct. 1985: 24).

137 " With his life choices, [the missionary] challenges by questioning, announcing and denouncing..." (Rigali, G. '*Relazione della Regione del Bangladesh*', XII Capitolo Generale 1989, *XAK*, File s.n.).

138 " The alterity of the other cannot be absorbed into my own identity; it is an absolute alterity, an alterity that calls my freedom into question..... The other derives this alterity, which unseats me, from the trace of God that he leaves behind in passing me" (Levinas, 1981: 121).

to recognise and accept their origin, felt uneasy and reacted fiercely, not because they had broken all ties with their past, but because the missionaries had, quite suddenly, changed their position. If over many years the Christian Rishi had been kept apart from the rest of the group (at least this was the missionaries' intention), now they were being asked to take another stance, closer to the new ideals of 'mission theology', but alien to them. Years of separation and missionary teachings had progressively created an 'élite mentality' among the Christian Rishi who, being taught that they belonged to a superior religion, were unwilling to renounce the rights and privileges of their new status. Both the process of secularization and the theology of Vatican II had great difficulty penetrating this 'mentality' which, even at present, dies hard.

Missionary reflection on activity among 'Untouchables' in Northern India during the late Seventies,[139] was to influence the Xaverians to adopt new ways of presence among the Rishi. A controversial contribution from the missionary-anthropologist Fr. S. Fuchs (1977b), advocated, through a systematically planned mass conversion, the building of a strong 'Harijan Church' in North India. Reactions to this proposal were immediate and Kalathil (1978: 12-17) accused him of a distortion of the ideals of conversion,[140] of questionable generalisations[141] and of a total obsession with numbers. Whilst for Fuchs conversion and evangelization are identical, dialogue with other religions becomes of insignificant value and evangelization is a one-way affair, for Kalathil, dialogue is more than a 'harmless promotion of inter-religious understanding': "There takes place [in dialogue] a continuous process of conversion of both the partners in the dialogue, in which both are active and both are evangelised". In Kalathil's view, the Church should "serve the weakest members in society for their own sake, considering it a privilege to serve them, joining hands with other enlightened believers who view service as its own reward.... and not in view of increasing its own numerical strength or popularity".[142]

Velamkunnel (1978a), contributing to this debate, notes how in rural areas the missionaries exercise power both in religious and secular matters, projecting an image enjoyed by village moneylenders and

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139 This debate is well documented by various articles which appeared between 1977 and 1979 in *Vidyajyoti*, a journal of theological reflection published by the Jesuits' Institute of Religious Studies, Delhi.

140 Kalathil equally contests Fuchs' claim, given without empirical evidence, on the special receptiveness of the Harijans to Christianity. If the Harijans "are in spiritual need, and ask for 'Christian hope' in their struggle for human rights", (Fuchs 1977b: 366) it does not necessarily follow that they seek 'conversion' and are particularly open to Christianity.

141 Two articles published by Frs. V. Lobo (1978) and D. D'Souza (1978), both belonging to the Capuchin order, explicitly accused by Fuchs for having neglected the Harijans in North India, pointed out further generalisations and even historical inaccuracies in Fuchs' claims.
" It is fashionable among people who have not studied sufficiently the history of the Missions of North India to blame the Capuchin missionaries..... Their 'successors' will do well to study the history of the Missions in North India and then to make plans for a deeper conversion of N. India to Christ...." (D'Souza (1978: 34).

142 Though sharing Kalathil's assessment on this issue, I do not share his concluding remark in which, by relegating the quest for human rights to the sphere of the secular as distinct from the sacred, he relegates this issue to the field of 'political parties' and the State. In a way, the reduction of evangelization to conversion made earlier by Fuchs, is reinforced when Kalathil seems to exclude the struggle for human rights from evangelization.

landlords, and "controlling human lives under the cover of pastoral concern".[143] Hence, a Christian "born in dependence, lived out in dependence, completes his span of existence in the same" (ibid.: 7), despite missionary promises to relinquish responsibilities as the people "become competent and more honest". Such dependence, which stems from missionary paternalism is, long-term, degrading for the voiceless beneficiary, but "wounded pride, humiliated human dignity will vindicate itself one day when the people become independent of the missionary" (ibid.: 8). This missionary activity, conveying such an image of power, arises, according to Velamkunnel, from 'the dynamism of Western culture', and ignores the contemplative spirituality inherent in Indian tradition. Since it is through "selfless love derived from contemplation and disinterested service" that people will discover the "man of God", Velamkunnel concludes by suggesting that the missionary should learn from the leaders of other religions by using "an idiom culturally understandable to the people".[144]

The relationship between contemplation and evangelization is developed in Velamkunnel's second article (1978b):[145] through a contemplative experience, the missionary actuates a process of self-emptying (*kenosis*), freeing himself from the quest for success, power and popularity, in an attempt to acquire a sense of wholeness and unity, to unify in himself all that is good in other religions, to become a self-gift to others in service, and to respect human freedom.[146] This process will trigger a structural change in mission stations when the individual parish priest are replaced by a 'core-community' of missionaries "living and sharing their lives in depth", or evangelising each other, so that "the overall image projected by the mission stations would be contemplative", as opposed to the image projected by the 'powerful' missionary.

The shift proposed for mission stations in North India, especially those among Harijans, from "institutions with secular power" to "centres of conscientization", is the topic of Velamkunnel's third article. Through a historical analysis of mission theology, he establishes that prior to Vatican II, the Church claimed itself to be a "sanctuary" where "the adherents are brought in, carefully guarded till the end" (Velamkunnel 1978c: 103). This, together with the ideas of Christian superiority created in them an "élite mentality", a similar attitude to that of the Rishi in Khulna.[147] By shifting from the concept

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143 "The missionary is the unchallenged monarch with tremendous power at his disposal" (Velamkunnel 1978a: 5).

144 ".... *Gurus*, swamis, monks, fakirs, etc., would bring out the religious nature of his life and works and project a different image..... His life-style, his vision of reality must carry the mark of a 'man of God' in an idiom culturally understandable to the people..." (Velamkunnel 1978a: 10).

145 In this article the author proposes that mission stations be conceived as centres where the Gospel and the non-Christian culture encounter each other.

146 "The contemplative makes no attempt at sacralizing his tendencies to dominate the helpless in any way and to make converts out of them..... He respects human freedom even though his dealings are with the illiterate masses.... He abstains from the least psychological pressure to win them over to the Church...." (Velamkunnel 1978b.: 78).

147 "The sanctuary dwellers claim their rights and privileges; they would resent any privation of these and may even forsake the Shepherd. Anyone who has been associated closely with the running of mission stations would be able to recall instances of Christians leaving the Church because they were refused privileges. One must remember that if the

of 'sanctuary' to that of 'sign' the Church's high priority is no longer 'conversion', since primary importance is not given to its size and rate of expansion, and since "the sign is meant to point to a reality beyond itself and its preoccupation is how to witness effectively to that reality"(Velamkunnel 1978c: 103).[148]

Velamkunnel, introducing the concept of 'conscientization' as complementary to 'evangelization',[149] points out that while the religious dimension of conscientization reveals that not all Harijans will accept "Jesus Christ as the Lord .... and desire to enter the visible Church",[150] the social dimension , being a personal and collective awakening, becomes a process in which people, including the missionary, can learn from each other.[151] This brings into question, as well as individual renewal, the transformation of structures within society, which, according to Velamkunnel, must be open "to certain values transcending the restricted fields of economics, politics, social and cultural life...". Far from avoiding political struggle, "conscientization will lead to a greater involvement in politics, but without becoming victim of political ideology".[152] With the principle of non-violence as leading guide, Velamkunnel urges "the conversion of the missionary, of the oppressed and the oppressor".[153]

Many would argue that the problem still remains when parties do not accept reconciliation and that, in the end, this position is highly utopian. Nevertheless, not as utopian as Levinas's "concern for the other", since here the question is: "Does one have the right to preach to the other a piety without reward?....It is easier to tell myself to believe without promise than it is to ask it of the other. That is

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Christians claim extraordinary treatment from the Church, if they demand free education, if they expect that goods from benefactors are distributed exclusively among them, they are only revealing what the missionaries have inculcated among them - the "élite mentality"..." (Velamkunnel 1978c: 103).

148 Ibid. "The Church as a sign is not essentially a converting Church. A sign preoccupies itself with exposure rather than expansion. That is not to say that expansion is unimportant, but that it is a subordinate concern...." (Frazier, W., *Mission Trends*, n.1: 30, quoted in Velamkunnel 1978c: 103).

149 " Conscientization is the process of awakening the total man to a fresh discovery of his dignity and potentiality... It brings about an upsurge of the dormant human spirit as it becomes aware of its worth. A conscientized person recognises, in all aspects of his life, his duties and his rights, his claims as well as his obligations. Conscientization is a continuous process of self-education, ever deepening and affecting both the individual and the collective consciousness of people..." (Velamkunnel 1978c: 107).

150 This, however, does not prevent Velamkunnel from finding common ground between these Harijans and others who are motivated by "a deeper sense of the Absolute, or perhaps a deeper realization of the meaningfulness of certain transcendental values...." since, "in all these cases evangelization has taken place because the value system, cultural relationships, consciences of men have been affected by the Gospel", or by what he had previously labelled 'Christian anthropology'.

151 "... Even though people are illiterate and backward in technology, still they are able to think, to discover truths for themselves and to help others to arrive at it" (Ibid.: 110).

152 Without paying service to any political party, the conscientization process advocates a "more enlightened participation in the common search..... to create new and less oppressive structures for the poor" (Ibid.).

153 " The process of conscientization cannot be separated from non-violence. The missionary assumes into himself the anxieties and the experience of hopelessness of the oppressed as well as the hatred and the fury of the oppressor. He heals the wounds of division and the effects of sin in himself and thus reconciles the two parties....." (Ibid.: 112).

the idea of asymmetry. I can demand of myself that which I cannot demand of the other" (Levinas 1988: 176). If we apply this here, the missionary would be alone in seeking conversion and "this concern for the other remains utopian in the sense that it is always 'out of place' (u-topos) in this world, always other than the 'ways of the world' " (Levinas & Kearney 1986: 32). By favouring this, Velamkunnel's claim that "conscientization is a method that respects the supreme freedom of man", takes on a more genuine meaning, and the other is not treated as "an object of philanthropy". Drawing to a close his reflections, Velamkunnel urges the missionary to free himself from the politics of power struggle, and then turn "to the dimension of existence which transcends those of dialectics", unifying thus conscientization to contemplative vision.[154] One should not forget, however, that conscientization is a process and the missionary, as part of it, participates in all the processual dynamics and his 'being a contemplative' is never an achieved status but a developing perspective.

H. Sixt, in a short article on caste consciousness centred his attention on the social psychology of caste and untouchability as evident from his apostolic work,[155] and relying on transactional analysis, he emphasises that "caste consciousness arises in a social encounter, a social transaction in which I am the giver and the receiver". Hence, consciousness, important in both partners of the social encounter,[156] becomes a critique against the many programmes put into practice in the past to help the lower castes,[157] which, according to Sixt, did not produce encouraging results, since they "cure only some of the symptoms; they may help but do not heal the core of the sickness of caste, which is a mental attitude". Using the same method of transactional analysis, E.J. Daly, a Jesuit working for twenty-five years among Harijans in Bihar, focused his attention on the Harijans' self-image, which " is that of a rejected, polluting, and self-rejecting person. This image, the result of cultural conditioning over centuries, affects the Harijan's deepest feelings and behaviour".[158] Daly's utilisation of the 'Karpmann

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154 " Only the contemplative is able to offer such a service to society. For only he who has synthesised in himself contemplation and the struggle for freedom, and has arrived at an integration of service and prayer, is capable of such a unitive [sic!] vision of man and society....." (Velamkunnel 1978c: 113).

155 Sixt labels caste as a "reality created by the mind of the collective..... although it may be based on objective realities outside the mind" (Sixt 1978).

156 ".... (T)he pride and self-conceit about the superior status you have merited/inherited on one side, and feeling of inferiority on the other side, undermining self-respect, energy, balance of judgement, hope, and perhaps leading to pathological conditions of lethargy, despair, depression, hypersensitivity, and further physical, psychological, and social degradation..." (Ibid.: 224).

157 Among them Sixt lists education, monetary aid, housing, land ownership, change of religion, special privileges, living among them, political agitation.

158 The author reached this conclusion almost by accident when, analysing the answers for a biblical contest (based on posters) of Harijan-Christian students aged 14 to 23, he discovered that "they identified not with the 'winner', David slaying Goliath, but with the 'loser', Job: ostracised, rejected, segregated, victimised..... What I had discovered, through the medium of these biblical posters, was in effect a projection exercise, whereby these ex-untouchables, without realising it, were proclaiming their inner world..... Quite independently from one another each Harijan boy saw himself as one with the under-dog, the persecuted; so, for instance, the second year's result ended up with the majority of Harijan youths picking a picture of Christ being scourged..." (Daly 1978: 318).

Triangle' of 'victim, persecutor and rescuer',[159] was widely applied by the Xaverians to explain their relationship with the Rishi. Daly's conclusions point to the discovery of a 'new self' by the Harijan, who, abandoning the 'victim' role, will find self-direction, being free to serve with love. This, applied to the Harijan Christians, will result not only in their being healed, but they will also recognise the redemptive value of their sufferings and return to evangelise their oppressors. Daly also recognises that "violence today is always an option for us, working among scheduled castes and tribes", manifesting his apprehension that non-violence is not always the easiest choice, but the one in line with both the Indian and Christian contemplative spirituality, as highlighted earlier in Velamkunnel's papers.

This lengthy discussion, illustrating both the Xaverian-Rishi relationship and missionary reflection, allows us to move away from a straightforward presentation of choices and alternatives as they occurred in the history of the mission, to an analysis of issues and ideas which form the basis of this relationship. We can thus observe that, while the Xaverians had chosen to work more consistently among the Rishi, this did not necessarily mean, at least not for those most involved in this process, that they wanted to 'convert' them to Christianity, as suggested by Fuchs with regard to the North Indian Harijans. On the contrary, the longer these Xaverians remained, the more they became convinced that 'conversion' was to be postponed. They, in fact, reacted strongly to the way some Protestants were 'converting' among the Rishi. Prior to Fuch's article, P. McNee, a pastor of the New Zealand Baptist mission, published the results of a survey conducted in Bangladesh during 1975. His main thesis is that the Christian message, in order to be successful in Bangladesh "must flow along caste and tribe lines", thus "the most powerful tools for evangelism in Bangladesh today are the one-caste or one-tribe Churches" (McNee 1976: 109). On various occasions he praises the 'Roman Catholic Mission' and he encourages the evangelists to imitate them.[160] Since then, many Protestant groups have tried to approach the Rishi without any significant success. As McNee recognises, the Rishi "wanted to become Christians to receive help, education for their children and to become men" (1976: 129); since they can obtain all this from the Catholic mission without being asked to 'convert' to Christianity, they naturally, at present, follow this option.[161]

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159 "According to Karpmann, this triangle of positions, 'victim', 'persecutor' and 'rescuer' is vicious - once you are in, you can't get out, unless the "player" becomes authentically aware and freely opts out. The person playing the role of victim, at any one moment, verbally or non-verbally, may shift into a persecutor role the next moment. ... It is interesting to note that Paulo Freire has discovered this same phenomenon working with social liberation. The oppressor, he says, is lodged in the head and heart of the victim. This is so because the 'victim' knows only one option to using power, as he has learned from his 'persecutor'.... " (Ibid.: 319).

160 "Although Khulna division has been neglected in the past, it must not be neglected in the future. The Church must be multiplied among the estimated one and a half million Namasudras and the 130,000 Muchis" (McNee 1976: 51).
"This is a caste which is sick, and knows that it is sick, and has sought healing in the right place - the Church of Jesus Christ...." (ibid.: 102).

161 I must point out here some serious inaccuracies in McNee's study referring to Catholic missionary activity among the Rishi in Khulna: 1) Even though the Rishi total a large majority of the Catholics in the Diocese, we certainly cannot speak of a 'monoethnic Church'. On the contrary, the problem for the Rishi has been that of establishing alliances with other Catholics within Khulna Diocese. 2) The numbers quoted by him on Rishi converted to Catholicism to date (1975), were far below parish records. 3) The missionaries did not particularly choose to 'convert' the Rishi, but, in many places, these were the only ones to accept missionary presence.

SIMULIA 1974-1990

Failure of development and renewed pastoral activities: 1974-1982

At this point in time, Simulia demonstrated the fallacy of a thesis, proposed by the missionaries since the mid-sixties, that the Rishi Christians would become 'better Christians' if a chance were given them to attain economic independence and possibly integration with the rest of society. Apparently, the proposed model of development had failed to achieve results and, if a new model was needed, this did not necessarily involve the Christianization of the Rishi. While for the missionary Christianity and development seemed part of the same process, the Rishi accepted Christianity only in so far as they received economic benefits.

Following Fr. Cobbe's death, many changes were to take place in Simulia, given the radical rethinking of missionary policy on pastoral activity and development projects.[1] The initial clash between missionaries and Caritas officials revealed the people's lack of involvement and their heavy dependence on the paternalism of the mission,[2] presenting overall a severe critique of the development enterprise since its start in 1968.[3] Later on, the 'relief syndrome' of the Christians prevented collaboration with Caritas,[4] and the Bishop had to intervene to reach a compromise aiming at separating socio-economic projects from church activities "to better integrate all classes, creeds, and castes of people".[5] Nevertheless, Fr. Boscato, in charge of Simulia between 1976 and 1982, vindicated the past missionary role which endorsed development, service to the wider community, project links with government agencies, changes in the fields of education, personal-social and economic progress, and co-operation between Muslims and Christians. This co-operation had deteriorated following Fr. Cobbe's death[6] due to lack of 'conscientisation' in the educational field, "increasingly widening the gap between the Mission and the local farmers" and leaving dialogue between the two parties at a deadlock. For this reason, Fr. Boscato insisted that newcomers, such as Caritas, should start to use "a new kind

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1 Boscato, A. Letter to Dr. Chiesa (Mani Tese), 26-8-1976, *SPA* (Simulia Parish Archives) .

2 Mallik, A.M. (CORR-Caritas Extension officer - Khulna) 'Observations during my visit to Simulia', 26-8-1975, SPA.

3 The Regional director of Caritas, Fr. Colombara, produced a series of statistics according to which only 20% of rich or middle class landowners had benefited from the project, while the remaining 80% of poor or landless peasants were still struggling for survival (Colombara, P. 'Task performance on evaluation of Farmers Irrigation Groups, Simulia Project Centre, 26-28 July, 1976', 31 -8- 1976, *SPA*).

4 "... At present there is no possibility of broadening the 'Church-compound' mentality among the people of the area.... The apathy of farmers will continue if the only stimulus is that of a paternalistic attitude..." (Ibid.).

5 " Many lessons were drawn and comments offered on what steps should be taken to overcome the deep 'relief syndrome' present in the area, particularly with the Christian Community....." (Minutes 'Meeting regarding Simulia Irrigation Project', March 22, 1977, *SPA*).

6 "... Unfortunately all efforts in this line [of co-operation between Muslims and Christians] have been nearly in vain for many different reasons, the last of which was the tragic death of Fr. Cobbe" (Boscato, A., 'Simulia as a Development Zone of CORR-Caritas', 1 June 1977, *SPA*).

of language where much emphasis should be put on the idea that only the farmers themselves could shape their own future development".[7] Seemingly, this policy was not contemplated by Caritas and Fr. Boscato criticised its excessive bureaucratisation which prevented immediate intervention.[8]

In the pastoral field, despite the programmes carried out to enhance Christian growth in collaboration with the Jessore Training Centre,[9] Fr. Boscato lamented the overall lack of religious, educational and social commitment among the Christians. The people's religiosity was seen as "traditional and based on feelings", and church attendance depended on the opportunism of individuals. The catechist's presence in a given village was similarly valued by the Christians in terms of material advantages and defence of the people's interest in front of the missionary. Fr. Boscato maintained that in marriage arrangements too the 'social factor' prevailed over the 'religious element', and that for certain unions it was better to have a civil marriage than a Christian celebration.[10]

Progress in some villages was hampered by the circumstances in others where "they reverted to the disgusting job of poisoning cows". Given the Christians' constant dependence on the mission, their nomadic tendency,[11] and their inferiority complex, the community seemed to present no promising future prospects. Fr. Boscato planned a "radical change", through the creation of village committees[12] destined to replace the traditional leadership (*matabbars*), and combat the relief mentality, whereby the Christians were misusing mission property.[13] This attempt to create a new leadership, favoured by

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7 Ibid.
Despite initial difficulties (cf.(Hossain, G.L., 'Evaluation on Reports of Seven Blocks under Simulia Development Zone', Dec. 1977 c., *SPA*), an irrigation project under Caritas started in January 1st, 1978 (Cf. Baroi, J.D. -Acting Regional Director- 'Simulia Development Zone', 19-10-1977, *SPA*; Mendez, L., -Development Director- 'Report on the visit to Khulna, Shimulia and Shelabunia, 28/10- 2/11 1977', *SPA*; Timm, R. W., -Roving Consultant- 'Tour of Roving Consultant to Bhabarpara, Jessore and Shimulia, Dec. 7-10, 1977', *SPA*). Some years later, a Caritas team revealed the failure of the project and the need to expand into other activities such as fish cultivation, handicrafts, small cottage industries. Meanwhile, Fr. Boscato criticised the lack of policy and excessive bureaucratisation of Caritas whose possibility of immediate intervention was becoming increasingly less effective.

8 Cf. Minutes Xaverian Meeting 19-3-1981, *XAK*, File 11/12.

9 Fr. Storgato, reporting from the community in Basantapur described it as 'poor but alive', with a good interest in religion, faith and instruction, and suggested making use of those signs present in Hindu worship, giving them a Christian meaning, reviving the value of prayer (" if not the Hindus will think that by becoming Christians they will have to give up praying!"), and adapting the Mass Liturgy to a Hindu environment: "It would be a mistake to give them a new, foreign way of worship. A survey on local customs and rites about prayers and liturgy among the Hindus would be a useful exercise..." (Storgato, M., 'Shimulia Parish: Visit to Basantapur Village', 28-2-1978, *SPA*).
Reporting from Noapara, Fr. Storgato lamented the presence of many irregular marriages, the wickedness of parents and relatives, and the ghetto mentality of the community (Storgato, M., 'Shimulia Parish: Visit to Noapara Village', 2-3-1978, *SPA*).

10 Cf. Minutes 'Incontro mensile di Marzo', 24-3-1980, *XAK*, File 11/12.

11 The Rishi of a new section of Simulia village (Pope John *para*, named after John XXIII), who in recent years had been relocated and given new houses and land, emigrated to India, after selling their property to the Muslims, and the movement of other Rishi between Bangladesh and India was intense.

12 These were functioning in every village through the implementation of *upasana* (liturgical celebrations), *sikkha* (instruction), *arthanoitik* (socio-economic commitment), and *mahila parisad* (women's committee).

13 " In my opinion there is an overall lack of concern among our Christians about religion, education and social commitment: this fact does considerable harm to any attempt to bring about a radical change within the Christian community. Because of this, I am trying to emphasise the following points: 1) Religious education with a special

both the missionaries and the people (especially the women who could for the first time elect their own representatives), was intended to promote a new awareness in the community through increasing educational activities[14] but, as expected, provoked the hostility of the *matabbars*.

1983: The first Rishi Priests: an occasion for missionary reflection on the socio-religious world of the Rishi Christians

When Fr. Coni took charge of Simulia in 1983, the situation had not greatly improved and, despite the creation of a general Parish Council, he maintained that "people's co-operation did not live up to expectations", and "some showed annoyance during meetings and religious instruction".[15] The local leaders were blamed for this, and since they expected to selfishly misuse their authority, so the report maintains, they did not act responsibly either in leading the community to religious maturity or in promoting education.

Despite Fr. Coni's commitment to improve the economic situation,[16] his main goal remained Christian growth. The ordination to priesthood in 1984 of the first Rishi, Fr. Joachim Mondal,[17] provided an opportunity to reflect upon the socio-religious characteristics the Rishi shared with the Hindus and Muslims of the area.[18] These showed, according to the missionary, a common understanding of God, seen as a very high, powerful and feared being, to be pleased through religious functions and rites, so as to receive in exchange prosperity, health and happiness. There was, however, a great inconsistency, according to Fr. Coni, between the celebration of ritual and the rest of life which was not "ruled by religion, but by a way of thinking almost in opposition to religious truths...". This was reflected in the social structure of the different groups,[19] the selfish exercise of authority, and a

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emphasis on the Sacraments; 2) Pressure on the parents to send their children to school; 3) Scope, need and importance of the Village Committee. ..." (Boscato, A., Letter to Bishop M. D'Rozario, 11-3-1979, *SPA*).

14 In all villages the children attended government schools and grants were given to deserving students to attend the Simulia Mission High School.

15 '*Dharma-pallio bharthoman....*', 24-10-1983, *SPA*.

16 He revived a project which had been proposed in 1977 by Fr. Boscato to Caritas: to bring electricity to Simulia (Boscato, A., 'Road and Electricity Line Project', 14-4-1977, *SPA*), and once electricity had reached Simulia, Fr. Coni concentrated on finding government sources to resurface the road that connected Simulia to the highway Dhaka-Benapole-India.

17 " December 30th was a Red Letter Day for the Parish of Simulia when Joachim Mondal, the first son of the Parish and the first Rishi was ordained priest at Simulia by the Bishop of Khulna in a most beautiful outdoor setting. A large number of people were present for this. A band came all the way from Baradal parish where the Catholics belong to the Rishi group. Fr. Joachim was assigned to work at Baradal" (D'Rozario, J. 'Some Historical Notes on the Diocese of Khulna' (from Dec. 12, 1970, to Aug. 18, 1986), Bishop's House - Khulna, (mimeo): 17).

18 " The advent of a local priest should have been a sign of maturity of the Christian community, a sign of growth, but many elements still present among our people give us a different picture....." (Coni, A., 'Notes on Simulia Parish', 1985c., Personal communication).

19 The different communities (Muslim, Hindu and Christian), all presented similar characteristics, typical of a rural area, where people were grouped according to religious units and sub-divided into smaller groups following family links. The

moral code of practice dictated almost solely by self-interest. The *Morols* (leaders) avoided being caught red-handed so as not to lose face, and exercised power in such a way that it increased their wealth and authority, since by these the individual was valued. Leaving aside its spiritual aspect, marriage, according to Fr. Coni, also had features[20] contributing to the low position of women.[21]

However incomplete and partial, this picture represented a real challenge for the missionary, eager "to work out some line of action to Christianise our people". Changing the image of God was a first priority, and a plan was designed to transmit Christian values through a direct line from the pastoral agents (priests, sisters and catechists) that passed down through a few committed Christians to reach the masses.[22]

This plan, borrowed from the Latin American Church's experience (Basic Christian Communities), was short-lived in Bangladesh and many missionaries reverted to a model closer to the South Asian setting with its emphasis on differentiated groups. Still, those missionaries working in the parish structure are confronted with the task of creating a Christian identity for their group without alienating them from the rest of society. In this sense, much missionary effort was directed to imposing a different kind of leadership on the Rishi, conducive to a different kind of society, the Church, which apparently had not yet managed to replace the old *samaj*, its values and code of conduct. The Rishi, on the other hand, showed resistance to change and, despite the increasing presence and commitment of individuals such as local priests and catechists, the evidence seems to point to a different kind of Christianity, filtered through a local set of values rather than based on western ideology.

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village-*para* units were under the authority of traditional leaders (*Morols*) who would look after the discipline and smooth running of the *samaj*, acting as judges when law and order were broken.

20 Marriage was seen, according to the missionary, as a need representing the coming of age, the satisfaction of sexual instincts, the need for a woman in the house, a lessening of the burden on the girl's family and increase in wealth for the boy's family.

21 "....The woman is considered a no-value property of the husband and, as a result of this, she betrays the husband, goes back to her family for protection, or commits suicide. The man, when unsatisfied, scolds and beats his wife, sends her away and betrays her without any restraint. Betrayal is felt a sin but shame or fear is admitted only when one is caught in the act...." (Ibid.).

22 " Therefore, we [pastoral agents] have to establish in the midst of our Christian communities those who are more 'converted' to the mentality of Christ, work with them, and through them reach all the others through a witness of life (Basic Christian Communities)" (Ibid.).

Breaking up the Rishis' "code of honour" and reforming the group's leadership

The passage from Rishi *samaj* to Christian *samaj* was to be implemented by means of meetings with representatives drawing up a Parish Pastoral Programme,[23] and the creation of a Parish Pastoral Council[24] to reform the old leadership of the group.[25] Occasions such as the ordination of another two young men to the priesthood at the end of 1987, were marked as a historical event raising community awareness and marking the present as both an achievement and a new start for Christian self-consciousness.[26] The Rishi saw symbolised in this an attainment of Christian maturity but, above all, a change in their status vis-à-vis the rest of society.[27] The missionary, however, remained very critical of the maturity of his flock,[28] urging them to grow towards adulthood,[29] and of the "strange mentality" that separated social and religious life. Individual and family privacy were almost non-existent, but "a moral, silent code is respected [to save the offender] unless he is caught red-handed....". To break this 'code', the missionary had to deal with the opposition of the 'secular' leaders, the *Morols* or *Matabbars*. The latter, who had been instrumental in bringing the Rishi to Christianity, maintained their mediating role with the aim of: 1) getting mission help for the people, thus increasing their power; 2) controlling the life of the *samaj*, and 3) managing and taking advantage of mission property. When the missionary

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23 In one such meeting, the 'Parish Pastoral Programme' was discussed at Jessore Training Centre (13-18 Feb. 1987) by 40 representatives of the community (25 male and 15 female). Pastoral priorities and the formation of Basic Christian Communities aimed to enhance family life, youth formation, women's active commitment and leadership roles in the community. Information and reflection on the past history of Christianity among them was deemed relevant to achieve a renewed awareness. A graphic illustration of the outcome of the meeting pictured a tree representing the community whose roots were the leaders, the family, the youth and the women; their human values symbolised by the tree's trunk, through formation and organisation, would build up the character of the community, whose good behaviour was shown in the tree's foliage and fruits (National Socio-Catechetical Training Centre, Jessore, *Annual Report of Activities*, 1987: 2, mimeo).

24 Cf. Simulia Parish Council Meeting, 27-10-1987, *SPA*.

25 It was also stipulated that "people must be prepared to elect members committed to pastoral work and willing to work for the community in co-operation with the clergy and the other members, without pursuing personal interests..." (Ibid.).

26 For that occasion, a booklet was published welcoming the two priests and providing a historical account of Simulia Mission from the times of Fr. Marietti (1856) to the present. Despite its inaccuracies and approximations this historical report reveals the mood of a community willing to know and interpret their own history as Christians: "After 127 years of Christ's message here, our first son, Fr. Joachim Mondal, who offered himself as a labourer in Christ's vineyard, was ordained priest on 31st December, 1984. Thanks to God, in His mercy, we have another day to look forward to - 11th December, 1987. It is the pride of Simulia, that two meritorious sons, John Gopal Biswas and John Lalit Biswas, are also offering their lives to God as servants in his vineyard. They have been ordained as priests by the Rt. Rev. Michael A. D'Rozario, Bishop of Khulna. May their lives be blessed and gratified" (*BIBARTAN - Simulia Dharmapalli*, 1987: 19-20, *SPA*).

27 " Simulia! ... You are in no way insignificant in human society. People everywhere will say how blessed you are. ... in your shadow a traveller rests... Praise God for his love and kindness. Do not forget Him" (Ibid.).

28 "... Keeping the people dependent on the mission in such key fields as education, health, housing, religious teaching, is tantamount to keeping them infants, incapable of taking their own decisions; as infants they will move only on the basis of self-interest. Religiously they will attend Church ceremonies to please God and the priests, and in exchange they hope to get the blessings of God and the help of the Mission....." (Coni, A., 'The aim of our presence and action in Simulia', 1988, *SPA*).

29 For Fr. Coni too, as for previous missionaries "it was their needs, their sufferings, their social untouchability that led them to seek for shelter and protection and being 'the poor', the destitute and set-apart, they became the target of Christian charity, love and justice... Maybe this was a necessary process but now it is time to try to awaken their consciousness so that they can become the builders and co-operators of the Kingdom. But how and at what price? Just as infants have to face the crisis of growth, so must our people..." (Ibid.).

tried to regain control in these matters he had to face fierce opposition from the *matabbars* who "reacted by alienating the people from the Fathers and disrupting their pastoral efforts....".[30] Missionary attempts to replace the leaders by calling new elections to the village and parish councils[31] resulted in failure.[32] Fraternisation with the new leaders was interpreted, according to Fr. Coni, as weakness on his part and, when he backed off, the relationship with the new *Morols* became redundant.[33] Fully aware that the former leaders had taken advantage of the mission,[34] the elected leaders approached the priest for information in order to use it against the previous *Morols* who, as it happens, had never ceased their underground operations. Thus, the failure of the new election was complete:

> We have new individuals, but the old mentality prevails. They bought the people's votes with the same old politics of promises, and now they are endeavouring to control the people and control the whole situation including us priests; in doing this, they are able to exploit everything....Meanwhile the former Morols, still recognised as such by the people, are continuing to operate underground.....[35]

Fieldwork in Simulia

When I visited Simulia in March-April 1989, this struggle was still underway. The traditional *Morols*, though they had resigned, were still ruling the *samaj* and people considered them the real authority, while those few who resisted their control were considered by the rest as people who neglected the *samajik niyam* (customary law). The missionary explained this situation in terms of the Rishi unable and afraid to exercise their own freedom: having always been under the authority of the *Morols*, it became difficult for them to imagine a situation in which they could plan their lives as individuals and as families. Part of Fr. Coni's plan had been to rebuild Rishi self-esteem by creating a better living environment[36] where family and individual privacy were respected. He hoped to end the

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30 The interference of the *Morols* firstly took the form of excluding the priests from the *bicars* (trials) conducted in the Christian *para* to solve social problems and, secondly, keeping check on and cross-examining those who contacted the priests. Moreover, the *Morols* started 'spying' on the fathers "... in order to use every piece of information against us ... Everything the fathers say has a boomerang-effect; even the homilies are used to criticise us and to show us in an evil light in the eyes of everybody...." (Ibid.).

31 Elections were held in all the villages in the presence of the two catechists during the second half of January 1988; cf. '*Grammo parisad Nirbachan* ....' , January 1988, *SPA*.

32 "...We have to confess our failure. The newly elected representatives have a very low profile within the community ... and at present many of them are at loggerheads with us...." (Coni, A., 'The aim of our presence and action in Simulia', 1988, *SPA*).

33 Interview with Fr. Alfio Coni, Simulia 24 -03- 1989.

34 According to Fr. Coni, many of the former leaders had misused mission money, especially during Fr. Cobbe's time who, so involved in new projects, did not have time to choose his collaborators carefully. The community, however, passed a heavy judgement on these leaders, reminding them that '*Misaner taka agun* ' [The money of the missionary goes into fire] (Ibid.).

35 Ibid. The old *Morols* were always ready to point a finger at the faults and mistakes of their successors, in particular during the celebration of *bicars*, where the latter's incompetence was best revealed.

36 A factor which contributed to this was the visits made by Muslim army and civil authorities who, since 1983, had chosen Simulia as a place to picnic. Fr. Coni used to remind the Rishi that others would willingly stay with them if their human and physical environment was conducive to this.

interference of the *Morols* in family life, for their decisions were often dictated by self-interest. When the *Morols* were unable to provide a solution, especially in the case of broken marriages, the people would then approach the missionary. When Fr. Coni invited the people to decide for themselves as responsible individuals, he was not only breaking with an old missionary tradition which had tended to take charge of every aspect of the Christians' lives, he was also going against the *niyam* and the institution of the *Morols* and hence creating insecurity among the Rishi, whose identity had always been understood in corporate rather than individual terms. If it was true that individual decision-making was subordinate to the *samaj*, it was also true that the *samaj* was always there to protect the individual in case of need. No matter what, they would stick together to defend themselves from outside influence, and the missionary, however much he tried, was an outsider. In this way, acting as one mind and one body, the Rishi *samaj* had tried to survive and, in their eyes, even a corrupt *Morol* was better than no *Morol* at all; if the Rishi were afraid to exercise their own freedom, this must be balanced with a fear of losing their identity. Thus the elders proudly claimed that in the past things were better, people had to obey the *Morols* and no Muslim would walk freely in their *para*.[37]

Christian (family) life and the 'underground world' of the Rishi Christians

The arrangement of marriage was another area where the different cultural expectations of Rishi and missionaries led to conflict. The *samaj* was necessarily involved every time a marriage had to be arranged or protected, and the missionary made the point that personal interests were behind uniting couples or keeping them apart, thus going against Catholic family values. According to the missionary, when the time comes to arrange these marriages, they are conducted in a hurry, with no thought of safeguarding their stability, but only of the possible advantages of new alliances with other *gusthi* The couple starting a new family come second; they cannot build any personal relationship and whilst the boy obeys his parents, the girl follows him as a slave in the in-laws' home. Matrimonial life is thus seen by the missionary as vitiated from the start, and the question Fr. Coni asks himself is: "How many marriages can be considered 'valid', from a Catholic point of view, given that there should be the consent of the two wanting to be married, and love between the two, which is the real sacrament of marriage?.....". Admitting the failure of Christianity in this respect,[38] Fr. Coni pointed out that while the arranged marriage of the Hindu Rishi could be broken at the wish of either of the two parties, in Catholic arranged marriages this becomes problematic because of the absence of divorce, so that the pair are condemned to an unhappy life. The reality of family life was covered up, according to Fr. Coni,

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37 The missionary, however, doubted if the Muslims were afraid of the Rishi or were just avoiding them.

38 ".... Christianity from this point of view has failed completely and has lost a battle... Christianity accepted the situation as it was, showered it with a blessing and this became lawful .... In a way this situation is worse because we try to put together marriages which do not work...." (Interview with Fr. Alfio Coni, Simulia 24 -03- 1989).

primarily by the men who would never talk of such matters with him, even in confession, not only because they would lose face, but because they "are the real oppressors, torturers of their wives, and they would never implicate themselves...".[39] This "underground world of the Rishi Christians"[40] seemed to be hidden only from the missionaries and the catechists. When Fr. Coni preached on this, the reaction was hostile and people complained that the Father was trespassing the boundaries of his proper duties. According to them, he was supposed to give his blessing on marriages and leave the rest to the *samaj*. All these 'underground' currents must be placed, according to Fr. Coni, within the framework of the *samaj*, which is, in its turn ruled and controlled by the *Morols*. In his view, to understand this reality means to go to the core of Christian Rishi life, maybe to their experience as former Untouchables involved in skinning and eating carrion. For, despite the disappearance of many traits, there persists, according to the missionary, a hidden code in their minds which prevails over Christian values and, only by tackling this, will it be possible to reach a certain compromise between their *niyam* and Christianity.

Leaving aside current theological approaches, Fr. Coni was interested in the day-to-day relationship between priest and people. According to him, these Christians had developed a ritualistic understanding of religion and he doubted their capacity to understand Christian doctrine and sacraments. Though at times they participated in celebrations *en masse*, at other times religion was regarded in terms of 'do ut des', offering something to God to appease him and reaping some benefits from the mission. Religion in this sense, or Christian religion, is not, so the missionary maintains, considered part of their daily, *samajik* life.

> We try to make them live our religion but those who accept it are very few, and even these do only up to a certain point....

Whilst Christian liturgical celebrations were deserted, the Rishi privileged the *Sobha Prartana* (religious gatherings) as a community event. On other important occasions, such as marriages or funerals, Fr. Coni lamented the lack of involvement of the community and the meaninglessness of the religious function as compared with the rites celebrated outside the Church[41] and, in line with his struggle against the *Morols*, he opposed the *bara khana*, the ritual meal concluding the *sraddha*.[42]

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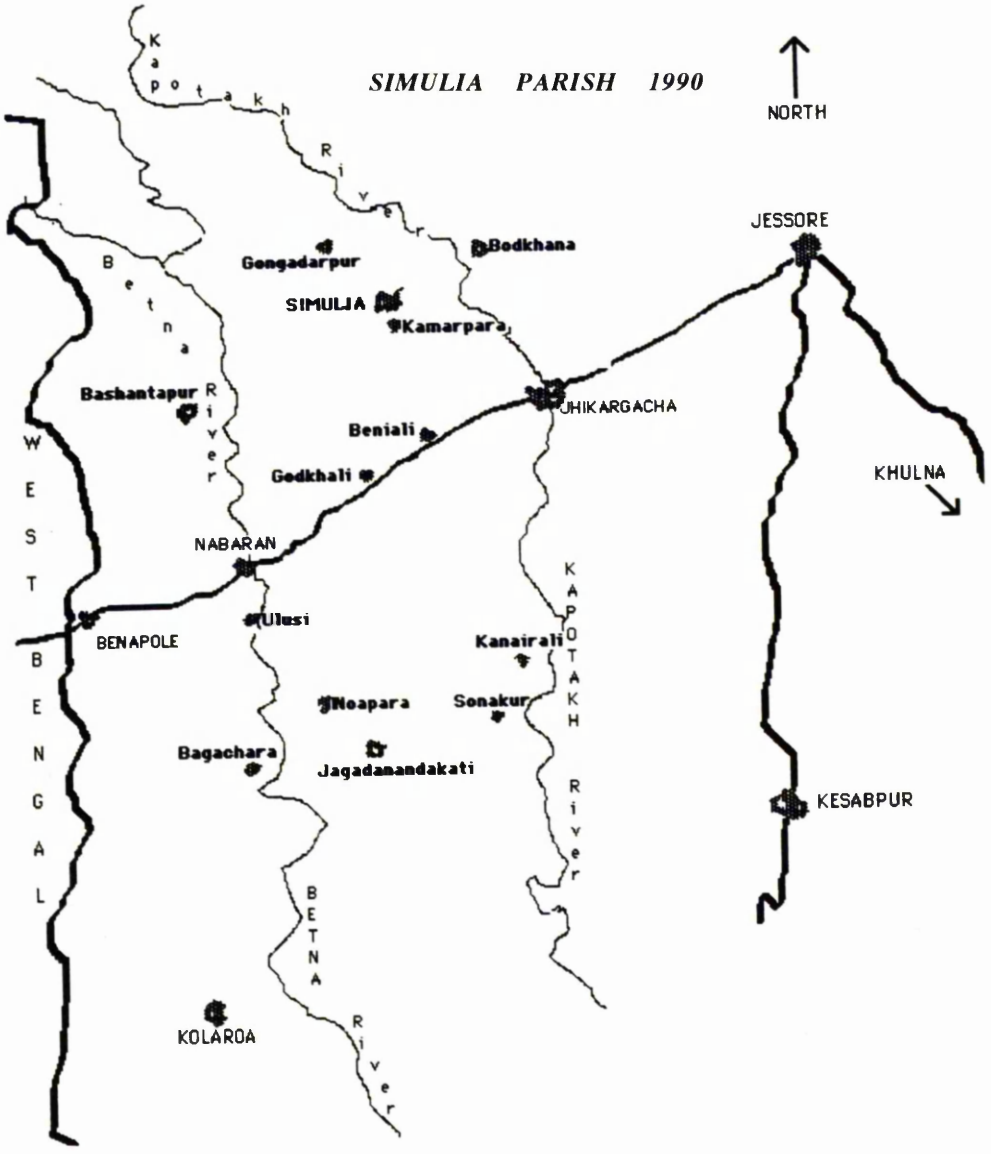
39 " Women are not happy with their situation but they cannot find the strength to overcome it, because they do not think that there can ever be a better situation for them. ... We have tried to help them to become aware of their dignity as persons, to show their mind in the family.... I invited them to take strike action against their husbands when the latter oppress them. Of course, the men reacted very strongly to this position of mine..." (Ibid.).

40 According to Fr. Coni, not only did Christianity not improve this situation, but it gave it a legitimate appearance, by giving a blessing and without giving a solution. Having to chose between religious ideals and *samaj* traditions, the young men prefer to stick with the *samaj* and build their own network of relationships.

41 " There is no participation in the marriage church ceremony apart from parents, witnesses and a bunch of kids... the real marriage ceremony happens outside the church.... I would also like to win back the communitarian aspect of death rituals..." (Ibid.).

42 ".... I opposed the fact that they would buy the prayers of the people with a meal, so I said to them ' If you want to offer a *bara khana* for the soul of the dead, invite the poor....', since usually it is the rich and the Morols whom they invite..."



Simulia outstations

Compared to Simulia centre, missionary intervention in the outstations proved more problematic, as in the extreme case of Bodkhana.[43] According to Fr. Coni, promiscuity and incest were common among these Christians, and the old customs of poisoning cows and eating carrion had never been abandoned. Over the last ten years no baptisms had been administered, since whenever the missionary

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(Ibid.). The charitable attitude of the missionary is certainly understandable, even though these Christians are probably less preoccupied with 'buying prayers' for the dead's soul than trying to fulfil a duty towards the community, and establishing alliances with the *Morols*.

43 Surrounded by Muslims, these Christians have to defend themselves more than usual, sometimes resorting to unorthodox methods: in 1979 they had begun once more to poison the cows of their neighbours, who reacted fiercely. In 1988, a Muslim was killed in the area and they were accused of murder. Four days later they went to the mission seeking protection from police harassment and, though the missionary was ready to help, it was only on condition that they revealed all they knew about the incident.

set foot there, a quarrel erupted, usually due to the missionary 'knowing too much' about their life style.[44] Similar disagreements are recorded at Gongadarpur: "When we try to enter into their lives, or better still, want to make Christianity significant for them, we reach a sort of rejection-crisis point and they react by telling us to stick to 'religion' (*Girja kare...*)".

Local priests among the Rishi

Fr. Albino Sarker[45] was assistant parish priest when I visited Simulia and though he praised the missionaries for their efforts to improve the economic situation of the people, he was very critical of the *doya* (pity) mentality developed by the Rishi Christians who put their lives completely into the hands of the missionaries.[46] This was favoured by their previous religious experience which encouraged a relationship of 'exchange' with God, and when they received from the missionary, the exchange consisted of pleasing him by attending church functions and religious instruction. The religiosity of the Christian Rishi, Fr. Sarker maintains, is fundamentally no different from that of all other Bengalis, who "are very pious people and who, though wanting to establish a good relationship with God, like to follow many gods...".[47] For this reason, the path of *Bhakti* is a particular favourite of theirs and religious gatherings such as *sobha prartana* and *kirtan* (sacred singing) are very well attended since there their devotion is completely fulfilled. During the *sobhaprartana* in particular, their prayers become a combination of both Hinduism and Christianity.[48] The difficulty experienced by the average Rishi Christian in understanding and distinguishing Christian symbolism, is related by Fr. Sarker to their way of understanding '*dharma*'. For instance, the distinction between sacred and profane is liable

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44 " If it were up to me, I would never baptise anyone from that village. The environment is not favourable to a Christian way of life..... They all stick together, and there is among them a tremendous unity to hide their weaknesses..... The first baptism in Bodkhana was administered in 1890 c. There were many reasons for their accepting Christianity, but if after a hundred years we are still at this level, I'm afraid we've missed the target...." (Ibid.).

45 This young Bangladeshi priest from Bhabarpara was on his first assignment -since 1985- when I met him in Simulia. Being a local diocesan priest, his vision is particularly relevant in terms of both the Rishi Christian community and the missionary presence among them. He could readily identify with missionary activity from his own experience, being himself partially the result of the Xaverian presence in his own community.

46 "...This has become a striking feature of Christianity, and while other religious Hindu and Muslim leaders receive gifts from the people, it is only the Christians who have become used to receiving from their leaders...." (Interview with Fr. Albino Sarker, Simulia 23 March 1989). As we have seen, a similar observation was made, some one hundred years previously, by Fr. Marietti's catechist, Sri Man Mohan Ghose.

47 " They believe in one God, but they need to worship many gods. As well as coming to church, they also go to worship a shrine.... they need to go back to their former gods... They are Christians, but when we speak their mind relates to their past history, hence the image of the Trinity becomes confused with Durga, Kali ... When in danger they make straight for the *ojha* (religious specialist) because he has the special power to pray to a particular god.... They confess these things as a fault on their part, but if they don't do it they are not satisfied..." (Ibid.).

48 This becomes also an opportunity to show off knowledge of the Bible and Church terminology: "...It shows that I am a *dharmik* person, and the others will follow me, because I can teach and preach. It shows that I know about religion.... In this case they will show an 'apparent' devotion, even though it does not come from inside. Some will even cry to make people believe their devotion...." (Ibid.).

to shifts, at times strongly linked and at other times distinctly separated. Thus, the priest is not considered a normal, human person, although certain reactions towards him are clearly not 'sacred'.[49]

One of the missionary's recurrent complaints against 'his Christians' was their failure to live in accordance with Christian ethics, separating religion from life. To explain this Fr. Sarker pointed to the discrepancy between the self-image that the Rishi presents to the world and the inner reality.[50] What the missionary sees as a moral failing is for the Rishi a struggle to accommodate two different cultures each with its own code of conduct. To bridge this gap they have differentiated *Mandali* and *Samaj*, the first representing the community of the faithful which celebrates together, the second the group in its secular or social aspects:

> If someone has committed a crime it will be the *samaj's* duty to administer the right punishment (and this must be given). This is not the *mandali's* duty, because the *mandali* is *pabitra* (sacred), and as such cannot punish. The *mandali* will forgive and excuse, but the *samaj* must and will give punishment...[51]

The distinction becomes blurred when the *samaj* develops into the *Khristio* (Christian) *Samaj*, and it is at this point that the missionary claims respect for what is Christian within the *samaj*. It is also at this point that the Christian Rishi drop the word 'Christian' and call it 'our *samaj*'.

> .... Before Muslims and Hindus they are most proud to call themselves *Khristio Samaj*, but among ourselves, since many rules are to be followed, they go back to referring to it as 'our *samaj* ': "In 'our *samaj*' we can do whatever we like... If I commit a sin, this a matter for me and not for discussion with the priest... it is my life; this is a *samajic bepar*...(a matter for the *samaj*)....".

Missionary efforts to promote individual freedom, so as to favour individual commitment to Christianity and build a new "society" (Church community), seem to have failed to take into account the Rishi understanding of both *dharma* and *samaj* and the way the two intersect and diverge at an individual as well as *samajik* level.[52]

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49 Even objects used in church become so sacred that people are afraid to touch them, and receiving communion in their hands has proved a difficult task. To the separation and sacredness of what or who belongs to God, they oppose the unholiness of actions and people. Thus, women during menstruation think of themselves as sinners, feeling unholy and dirty (*asuci*), and for that reason many do not go to church, nor do they wish to speak to the priest.

50 "When we speak directly about their faults they cannot tolerate it, because the Father 'has seen through us.... From now on we will be nobody for him, we are *kharap* (bad)'. In this sense it is almost impossible for them to admit their sins during confession and, if they do confess, it is very indirectly '*Kharap kaj kareci*' (I have done something bad), but they won't explain it. The same happens in daily life... They do not want to discuss such problems... They are most proud and hence this 'duality'..." (Ibid.).

51 Ibid.

52 This invites a comparison between a Judeo-Christian understanding and evolution of individualism as opposed to 'holism' as understood by Dumont in his *Essays on Individualism* (1986).

Simulia Christians and Catechists

In interviews with the Simulia Christians the elders were very articulate about the reasons and intentions of those Rishi who, over 140 years, had accepted Christianity.[53] All stressed the previous experience of the group as 'set apart', oppressed and compelled to survive by practising 'dirty works', poisoning and skinning cows, and eating carrion meat. Although they tended to blame themselves rather than society, it remains doubtful whether the continued practice of 'illegal works' (as in the case of Bodkhana) constitutes for them a moral dilemma or rather the coping strategy of a minority in the struggle to survive. Furthermore, being myself classified as a missionary, they were most probably answering according to my expectations and seeking to gain my *doya*.[54] The experience of one of the oldest Simulia Christians, coming from Digri during Fr. Nava's period (1892-1924), emphasised the role of the missionary in the acquisition of human dignity,[55] but most others thought that it was "change" that allowed the Rishi to gain acceptance in society.[56] In accepting Christianity, these Rishi had to renounce many of their old ways, but they have been reasonably successful in negotiating what they value without having to completely forsake their cohesiveness and group identity. Their attitude towards the mission recalls the Bengali proverb: "It's best to tolerate the kick of a cow if it gives milk." The Rishis' sense of guilt seems, despite everything, to endure; 140 years after adhering to Christianity, they continue to feel inferior whenever reminded of their "low origin". The name 'Muchi' still hangs over them and they still recall the old proverb "No matter how high the *sakun* (vulture) flies, its eyes are always fixed down low."

The singular experience of Manaranjon who, from being a Hindu Rishi, not only became a Christian, but also a catechist, and a Christian leader within the community, seems to represent the

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53 Their motives for turning to Christianity were identified, in line with what has previously been said: 1) as a protection to escape society's retaliation when caught in 'illegal activities', 2) to get financial help from the missionary, when not able to continue their previous activity, and 3) to acquire "dignity as a man".

54 "..... The Hindus and Muslims hated the Rishi because of their illegal works. They were addressed as muchi' or 'chamar' and were neither allowed to enter their bazaar, their schools-colleges or their houses, nor to participate in their meetings, nor bathe in the same *ghat* [landing-stage on ponds and rivers]. To free themselves from all these problems, they became Christians...." (Interviews with Simulia Christians 22-31 March 1989).

55 ".... Fr. Nava would visit the villages and while people were busy weeding the Father would sit with them in the fields. He would talk with them and even share a meal in the Rishi households. We were small then. I was 12 years old. My parents had already died, and my relatives would not take care of me. Aware of this, Fr. Nava took me and my brothers to Simulia and kept us as gardeners at their house. Gradually later on we became Christians.... The Father loved us, gave us work and shelter and much help and for this we accepted Christian religion. Because we have protection, people of other *samaj* respect us, and relate well to us..... Doing low-standard jobs as Muchi, people used to show us hatred, but once in touch with the Fathers we gave up such jobs, and so we were respected. Previously our environment was dirty and we were illiterate, but once Christians, the fathers helped us to change all this, urging us to give up this work of ours. Since becoming Christian, I have gained respect from everyone. Before, others would torture us. Now, even though we beat them, they do not react, on the contrary they are scared because the Fathers protect us....." (Ibid.).

56 They stressed in particular the role played by education in the implementation of this change and acceptance by others: "If the rate of those educated increases, we can advance in every field, and our honour too will increase...". In conjunction with this, development and progress in the economic field, allowing them greater interaction with Hindus and Muslims, also played a vital role.

"ideal individual Rishi" in the sense expected by the missionary; but he also embodies the desire of many Rishi to acquire human dignity.

> .... I am grateful for this opportunity to narrate the reasons behind my conversion: namely to acquire dignity as a man, to find a way of establishing myself, to earn a living and to follow the encouragement of Fr. Mario's [Veronesi] ideal of life. The desire for dignity began early on in my school life, when I never came first in class, simply because this would have meant destroying someone else's honour. Realising this, made me feel inferior and many times I felt that my birth in this world was meaningless. I received no encouragement even from my relatives on this score. At about 11 years old, my father gave me in marriage to a girl (now my wife), who was then about 5. Both my father and my father-in-law objected to my studying; the latter in particular, since as well as not seeing the value of study, he was also afraid that once educated, I might then refuse his daughter. Despite such obstacles, I managed to continue with my schooling through the help of scholarships as a poor and meritorious student. Nevertheless, I felt something lacking - I was not gaining respect from others and hence a strong desire grew within me to convert. This was linked to a fear of never establishing myself if I were to remain with my religion. For within this religion of mine, there was no individual to whom one could turn for support and assistance. Like others, I too believed that even if educated, I would not find work and for this reason also, my desire to be converted increased. Fr. Mario came to our village in 1971 to visit a Christian family, and when his bicycle broke down, I repaired it. That day I was fascinated by his behaviour but held back from saying anything to him. News of his death only a short while after at the hands of the Pakistani army filled me with distress. It was from that day onwards that the desire grew more in me to become a Christian.... despite the fear of rejection from my parents. It was only later, when many from our village began to communicate with Fr. Cobbe with a view to converting, that I felt like joining them but I still lacked courage. One day I shared this desire with my father but he rejected the idea outright. Still I did not lose hope, and I tempted them by saying that becoming a Christian would secure me a job. Finally, I succeeded....[57]

Manaranjon found it significant to compare the 'unfaithfulness' of the Rishi with that of the people of Israel, as denounced by the prophet Hosea. The choice of comparison is revealing: the Rishi as a people are the only group to have not only received the Christian message, but many other benefits along with it. Witnessing the 'ungrateful' attitude of his own people and sharing many of the priests' views, as a recently converted Rishi himself, he demonstrates all the enthusiasm of conversion, and encourages his own people to make a decisive and responsible move towards Christian maturity:

> ... The truth is that we have not yet been able to make this religion our own. The idea of Christianity has entered the minds of many, but it has not yet reached our hearts....

Most probably it will be the individual commitment of people like Manaranjon which will mediate a transition from Rishi *samaj* to Christian Rishi *samaj* within a necessarily different, 'vernacular' understanding of Christianity.

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57 After his conversion many of Manaranjon's relatives reacted badly, including his father-in-law who gave his wife in marriage elsewhere. However the girl escaped and took refuge in the mission, where Fr. Cobbe baptised her and celebrated their marriage. Gradually family relationships improved but some members have never forgiven Manaranjon (Interview with Manaranjon Mondal, Catechist of Simulia, 24 March 1989).

SATKHIRA 1973-1990

Two different stages characterised the Satkhira mission during this period: in the first missionary presence was discontinuous,[1] but in the second, following Fr. Gobbi's appointment in 1985, a certain stability was reached, despite recurrent problems. As mentioned earlier, some Satkhira Christians felt betrayed by the missionaries when they left the parish and started working among the Hindu Rishi[2] so that they reacted fiercely when a meeting of all Christians of "Rishi origin" was called by the Jessore Training Centre, during Fr. Fagan's period in charge (July 1981- May 1983).

Power struggle within the community

Fr. Gobbi's line of activity, closely resembling that of Fr. Coni in Simulia, was intended to awaken in his Christians an attitude of self-reliance and economic independence from the mission. But as the power of traditional leaders (*matabbars*) was measured by the material help they obtained from the missionary, tensions between the latter and the *matabbars* were destined to increase. One of the fathers observed that "the history of this community can be written in terms of the different alliances of the leaders with the succeeding missionaries in charge."[3]

This can be seen in the case of the former Headmaster Daniel Gain.[4] Due to the frequent change of missionaries, his authority increased and he became the point of reference both for the missionaries and the community. He not only misappropriated mission goods but also arranged for the school to be transferred to government control without the missionaries' consent, receiving over a period of time (until the missionaries discovered his deceit) two full stipends. Later, during Fr. Valotti's period in charge (1982-3), Daniel gave his daughter in marriage to a Protestant in Dhaka without permission from the parish priest, afraid that this would not be granted. As a result, both he and his daughter were excommunicated (*sasthi*), and tensions between him and Fr. Valotti grew. Daniel's decision to marry

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1 Some missionaries left the parish during this time: Fr. Spiga, after seven years (1973-1980) moved first to Chuknagar and later opened a community for the disabled in Bagachara; Fr. Falcone started in 1979-80 to promote leather work among the Rishi and moved out of the parish in 1982; Fr. Paggi, in charge during 1976-79, left the parish to begin a new activity among the Hindu Rishi of Chuknagar, together with Fr. Lupi, in 1980.

2 Fr. Paggi while in charge at Satkhira wrote to the Bishop expressing his disappointment in parish activity and announcing a different missionary choice for the future: "..... I feel that the service we are trying to give to the Khulna Diocese is not fully in accordance with our missionary vocation, so I think you should not be surprised or displeased if in future (perhaps the very near future) some of us will choose to work among Hindus and Muslims....." (Paggi L., Letter to the Bishop, 18-11-1977, *Baradal Parish Archives*, henceforth *BPA*).

3 "... For instance, as soon as Fr. Valotti left, those who had supported him started causing trouble for Fr. Gobbi. The latter, on the other hand was supported by Fr. Valotti's opponents.... " (Interview with Fr. E. Garcia, Khulna 11-2-1989).

4 Daniel, who came from Sriula (Baradal) - a village defined by Fr. Koster as 'a den of robbers' - had the good fortune to receive an education and, thanks to his own efforts and to help from Fr. Koster, he managed to become headmaster of the mission-run school.

his daughter in Dhaka, be it to a Protestant, confirms the desire felt by some within this community to dissociate themselves from the group as such, and to use Christianity to this end.[5] Three months after Fr. Gobbi took charge in Satkhira, some interceded for Daniel to be re-admitted to the community and not only did this happen, but from opposing the parish priest during Fr. Valotti's time, he became 'allied' with Fr. Gobbi against his new rival, Gregory Banerjee.

Early in January 1985, Gregory, a Satkhira Catholic, seemingly of Brahmin origin, and employed at the Diocese as land officer, started the extension of a small shop built on mission land the very day after Fr. Valotti left the mission. Fr. Gobbi was assured by Gregory that only minor repairs were being carried out, but soon a new, larger sweet shop was ready for inauguration. As expected, Fr. Gobbi declined the invitation to bless the shop and accused Gregory of cheating. Later he lamented: "our people knew what was going on, but, out of fear, nobody came to tell us...".[6] On the occasion of the Bishop's pastoral visit, Gregory wrote a letter to the Bishop accusing Fr. Gobbi of not fulfilling his priestly duties and siding with another leader (Daniel). He concluded with the warning that the missionary should either change his attitude or "peace will end in our *samaj* ". In the presence of all, including the Bishop, Fr. Gobbi answered the letter point by point, so that Gregory lost face. The Bishop, as well as the Diocesan body in Khulna, supported Fr. Gobbi "but they cannot take any chances since they are afraid of possible threats from Gregory", and indeed, Gregory carried out his plan of retaliation, advising a Muslim to build a *pakka* shop almost entirely on mission land (cemetery).[7] Despite the fact that Fr. Gobbi had on other occasions expressed his frustration at obstacles which disrupted the atmosphere of both parish and diocese, he seemed determined to continue his activity as a parish priest.

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5 This closely resembles the attitude of some Baradal and Simulia Catholics who in the past established marriage relations with the Protestants of Faridpur. When visiting Baradal, I witnessed fierce reactions to Daniel's attitude by some relatives of his who asserted that, though Daniel did not want to mix with them, "he can't escape being one of us!".

6 Although Daniel and other influential Christians followed the example of the missionary in not attending the inauguration ceremony, "the fear of Gregory's power still grips the majority of our Christians" (Gobbi, G., Letter to Fr. Valotti, 4-7-1985, personal communication).

7 Following written complaints to the police to stop the construction and court cases taken by the Muslim against the missionary, the Diocesan Central Office took the matter into their own hands and decided in favour of Gregory and his associates. At that point, Fr. Gobbi handed over all land deeds of the Satkhira Parish to the Bishop asking him and his office to deal with land matters: " The cause of this dissension and strife are solely the dishonest manoeuvrings and dealings of Mr. Gregory Banerjee, employed at the Diocesan Central Office, who, as well as taking advantage of his position and of the Satkhira Catholic Mission landed property, is, at the same time, capable of stirring up discord and contention between the Christian and the Muslim communities just to ensure his own influence, prestige and power in local affairs....." (Gobbi, G. Letter to Bishop M. D'Rozario, 15-12-1987, *Satkhira Parish Archives - Sat.PA*).

Reflections on past history and Christian awareness

In order to promote self-awareness among his Christians, Fr. Gobbi abolished the ineffective Parish Council,[8] attaching more importance to the *Grammo Komiti* (Village Committees),[9] and urged the eleven communities[10] to explore the past history of Christianity. A set of questions, designed to provoke recognition of the ineffectiveness of relief, were preceded by more general questions on the history of Christianity in individual villages.[11]

All responses give a lengthy description of the different communities before conversion, stressing, in particular, their experience of oppression and ostracism. While many underline the injustice of a society which treated them as slaves,[12] others emphasise the Rishis' own responsibility for their situation, revealing a strong sense of guilt on their part.[13] The use of the third person while recounting the history, so as to distance themselves from the 'dirty Muchi', alternates at times with a more vivid experience lived in the first person: "we had no value as human beings....". Thus, not only did they have "no property, money, prestige, nor honour...", but they were also cheated by Hindus and Muslims of land and money. They suffered at seeing their children unable to play or sit at school with other children.[14] The one recurrent theme, however, which summed up everything, was simply: "We were not considered humans....".

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8 This had been established by Fr. Fagan and continued by Fr. Valotti, made up of priests, catechists, sisters and two representatives from each village, appointed by the missionary.

9 The process of validating these committees began with a reflection on the 'National Pastoral Plan of the Church in Bangladesh', which was distributed by Fr. Gobbi to each village community. After a meeting in Jessore with the catechists, it was decided to hold a seminar involving the whole parish.

10 While only the community of Santola, of recent formation, is located south of Satkhira, all other villages are north of Satkhira. Six of these (Senergati, Manikhar, Dhandia, Joynagar, Kamarali and Kharda) are closer to the West side of the Kabadak River, and another four (Jeltupi, Sagdah, Goalchator, Roghunatpur) are closer to Kolaroa. These notes were gathered by the catechists and are kept in the *Sat.PA*, and the Jessore Training Centre.

11 The notes produced by the Christians show good historical accuracy, despite the lack of any written source at their disposal. They placed the start of the mission precisely at 1917 by the Fathers (Jesuits) of Calcutta, and though not recording the names of the very first Jesuits who worked there (Frs. Wauters, Demsar and Keyes), they remembered all the missionaries since Fr. Dontaine started working there in 1926, producing a list of 28 names to date of fathers and lay brothers. Furthermore, the successive conversion of each village was duly recorded, Goalchator, Dhandia and Senergati being the first to accept Christianity (1917-18).

12 " They had no position in society... they were kept as slaves...their samaj was down-trodden and oppressed .... The Hindus would purify their houses with cow-dung when some of them entered their residence... ... If work was not available they had to starve for that day... Widows had to work in the houses of Muslim families and spend their days greatly overburdened...".

13 Because of their own faults they could not maintain good relations with others.... The Muslims used to look down upon us because the Rishi community was abominable..."(Joynagar).

14 "... They had interest in education, but the schools were run by the government and as well as the teachers not paying attention to them, other students would look down on them and would not mix with them. At times they would beat them and chase them out of school..." (Senergati); " They were not allowed to sit at school with the others... they had to carry their sitting material from home..." (Joynagar).

Regarding their past religious experience, these Christians remarked that their poverty had compelled them to practise their own sort of religion (*Karma-Dharma*), defined by some as 'Rishi *Dharma*', celebrating, in the main, the inexpensive *Kalipuja* at gatherings under sacred trees, since they had no proper temples. Although these Rishi could afford only "small *pujas*, ... they still showed great devotion for other gods and goddesses..."; *Bhakti* thus had helped them to keep open a religious path, despite poverty and segregation.

A number of respondents underlined the difficulties created by the rapid succession of missionaries and catechists. As a result of sudden changes, "the father is disliked by the people" and "if anybody leaves, it disheartens us...". On the relief mentality most were understandably cautious,[15] and while some stressed the damage done by relief activity that promoted "laziness and dependence",[16] others pointed out that many Christians had moved from the villages to other places[17] where relief was still available.[18]

Implementing the findings of historical reflection

Early in January 1987, 58 representatives of the community (42 males and 16 females) met for one week at the Jessore Training Centre to plan a pastoral programme for the whole parish, based on the results of the above reports. The assembly adopted as its conclusions those put forward by the group of elders who gave a graphic presentation of the Christian community as a small tree in a pot to be transplanted in "original soil".[19] After the meeting, the missionaries, catechists and representatives of

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15 "As we are poor, we still have the mentality of getting relief. Since our forefathers did not leave us any property, we have no means to overcome our situation. We are not lazy. What we earn through hard labour is spent to keep our family. After a day in the fields or in the market-place, when we return home, our children demand this and that; as a result whatever we earn goes to them and we cannot save. This is one of the biggest problems of our Jeltupi village.....".

16 "... Receiving relief, a relief mentality has grown in us. If we get things without effort then we think - why should we struggle to achieve them? Since mission authorities have provided considerable relief aid, we cannot forget it: the more we get the more we expect to get. If all of a sudden this stops, we begin to criticise. We do understand that to have such mentality is not good for us, since dependence on others cannot bring improvement. Relief makes people lazy, it can never improve our situation and it should be stopped" (Sagdah).

17 "Relief is still going on in Baradal, Khulna, Sanadanga, Tala and Chuknagar, and due to this the greed for relief is still present in us...." (Senergati).

18 Many people from Dhandia, a village with 85 families and around 500 Christians in 1918, had left for India, Khulna and Satkhira, reducing the numbers to 24 families and 150 people in 1986. The same had happened in Senergati, Joynagar (where there were 50 families in 1962 and 31 in 1986) and to some extent, to those Christians from other villages who came to resettle in Roghunatpur.

19 The land represented the people of the community or the Christian family members while the tool to dig the land represented the head of the family. The use of fertiliser or manure represented the teaching given by parents and guardians to the members of the community whilst the process of transplanting and watering the young tree was the community acceptance of baptismal responsibilities. Just as a young tree must be fenced and protected so too must be the dignity of sacraments received by the community, while a full grown tree gives as a result maturity and self-sufficiency. Thus, the pastoral priorities outlined on that occasion were summarised in 1) deeper religious formation through catechism teaching and prayer; 2) awareness of human dignity; 3) leadership oriented to the service of the community; 4) common effort towards self-sufficiency. The organiser of the meeting concluded: "The spirit of competition between youth and elders kept the programme very much alive" (National Socio-Catechetical Training Centre, Jessore, Annual Report of Activities, 1987: 1).

the people toured all the villages in order to convey the outcome of the meeting. A prompt, positive response came especially from the youth and the women, and only the men remained aloof, defending their role as 'protectors' of the little plant that was the Christian community. With this accomplished, Fr. Gobbi took the opportunity of asking the villages to elect one male representative for each village and one woman for every two villages - this was the only means to make the women's presence accepted - to be part of a new Parish Council, but the *matabbars*' reaction nullified the attempt.[20]

Hindu-Christian Rishi connection; division among Christians in Satkhira town

At the Jessore meeting the Christians were also urged to reflect upon the presence in the neighbourhood of Hindu Rishi, who totalled c. 3,093, and on how to establish good relationships with them.[21] This move to involve the Christians more directly can be explained by the missionary's desire both to broaden the ghetto mentality of his community, to justify the recent missionary presence among Hindu Rishi and to bring into the open the underground relationship, which had always been maintained between the two groups. It must be added that the Christians who objected to being associated with the Hindu Rishi were mainly those living in Satkhira centre who, after years of attempting to acquire a new status in society, were not only opposed to being identified as 'Rishi' but also did not mix easily with newcomers. The Christians of Satkhira town came mainly from Baradal, Asasuni, Kolaroa, Senergati, Dhandia with a few from the Barisal area, and had moved to Satkhira back in 1939, as cooks, caretakers, catechists and teachers, after Fr. Koster had taken up permanent residence. All these are now residing in Sultanpur *Para*. Together with the Christians residing in Batkelkhali, they are well-off and are engaged in furniture-making, in the jute and skin trades, and running welding and laundry shops. The third and most recent group are mainly agricultural labourers, traditional leather-workers or makers of bamboo fences and grass mats and live in Bastola (Jerusalem *Para*). Their environment reflects the poor economic situation which they endure in the hope of receiving land, a home and maybe a job, as had happened with the first-comers. The latter do not mix at all with the newcomers and although the liturgy is celebrated together, no other activity is held in common.[22] While many of the old Satkhira Christians had become rich by receiving from the mission, often by cheating and misappropriating mission goods, they are not ready to share this fortune with others .

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20 " The *matabbars* did not react excessively to this, but they showed indifference. In fact, the people elected are insignificant and cannot represent anybody. I called a meeting of this Parish Council in which we established some rules and occupations, dividing the group into commissions according to the four priorities we wanted to achieve.... Unfortunately they lack initiative; if I start something they follow it for a while but soon everything collapses. Only when they show fervour of their own accord can a project advance.... People seem discouraged... The only work that proceeds is the *arthanoitik* (social) committee, which leases the mission land to the people of the village...." (Interview with Fr. G. Gobbi, Satkhira 12 -2- 1989).

21 Apparently, no one reacted this time against the missionaries who had suggested a more open collaboration between the Hindu and the Christian Rishi.

22 Even the attempts made by a sister to create a single credit union for the women of the three *paras* has completely failed.

Many missionaries, seeking to change this mentality, realised that they had created a new breed of leaders who, in addition to having economic power like the traditional Rishi leaders, were also educated and well-equipped both to control the Christian community and to establish social relations with Muslims and caste Hindus. It was mainly out of frustration that some missionaries decided to leave Satkhira and to operate in other environments.

Organisation of the Parish and role of the traditional leaders (*Matabbars*)

While in Satkhira centre an elected 'village committee'[23] helps the priests to run the socio-pastoral activity of the community, in the 11 villages the traditional leadership of the *Matabbars* continues.[24] Past attempts by the missionaries to introduce changes by electing a 'village committee' including young men and women have constantly failed in the face of the determination of the elders to hold on to social and religious power,[25] keeping this within their own *gusthi*[26]

The *matabbars'* instinctive opposition to change, hampering the social improvement (*unnati*) of the community, has kept the villagers in a closed environment without outside contacts, and is motivated - so the missionary maintains- by their fear of losing power. Even efforts on the part of young people to continue their studies are obstructed and when students decide to leave the village for further studies, they have the leaders to contend with. Moreover, the whole village depends on them as moneylenders, peacemakers and mediators, and hence nobody can dispute their decisions. In this sense, the missionary saw that the action of the local leaders and his own activity represented parallel discourses. As the *matabbars* would never be caught out, they always presented a good front to the missionary, sure in the knowledge that the people would never accuse them publicly.[27] Despite many improvements within the community, there was a deeply-rooted fear of 'foreign people' and a ghetto mentality which has

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23 This consists of four men and four women, a young man and a girl.

24 At Senergati, for instance, in 1983 -when Fr. Valotti was in charge- the *Matabbars* managed to control the elections -so that only young men were elected - and later they either discredited or manipulated those elected. Some years later, to put an end to this situation, Fr. Gobbi proposed a new election procedure and at the first meeting one of the *Matabbars* suggested electing nine representatives, one from each of the nine *gusthi* (kinship line) in the village. Although the Father agreed, he pointed out that such divisions did not correspond to a Christian mentality. In fact, according to Fr. Gobbi, the strongest *gusthi*ruled over the others, who kept a low profile.

25 The *matabbars* have never permitted others to represent the people, not even in a purely religious-pastoral capacity. In Kharda, for instance, some Christians were eager to assist the priest in village activity, but when marriage matters were discussed they had to resort to the old *matabbars.*

26 "They feel the importance of their *gusthi* a great deal, and there are rivalries which go back many years. Once the Sardar were the most powerful, but since their old leaders have died and those who replaced them are not strong enough, they have been replaced by the Boiragi. The latter have been involved in all the problems we had in Senergati during these past years. The other strong group is the Biswas, but not strong enough to impose themselves over the Boiragi who talk well and fight even better....." (Interview with Fr. G. Gobbi, Satkhira 12 -2- 1989).

27 "In private, some do accuse them, but if I refer to their faults at a meeting, I am left alone and nobody supports me, just as if I have made it all up...." (Ibid.).

prevented them from opening to others.[28] In this sense, the village catechists too, even though Rishi, are treated as 'outsiders', as long as they represent and implement the will of the missionary. Often, a catechist living in a village is obliged to use all his diplomacy to save himself when caught between "the missionary's and the *Matabbar's* powers". Despite his training, he cannot avoid being pulled into "village politics, mindful both of not displeasing the *matabbars* and of pleasing the father".[29] The only possibility of improvement lies, according to Fr. Gobbi, with the younger generation who wants to resolve this state of affairs.

Power struggle in Satkhira town

This situation is more evident within the Satkhira town community where three groups are competing for power: 1) the elders - some of them *matabbars* - who, afraid of losing their power, do not support innovations which they cannot control and which, in some way, undermine this power; 2) their older sons (25-40 age group), who are already married, aspire to the power of the elders and, like the latter, are conservative and 'fundamentalists', even in religious matters.[30] 3) the young men (15-25 age group) who, with missionary support, promote innovations within the community. This gives them power to act without the permission of the elders, and stirs up envy in their older brothers who, yearning for power, find themselves overshadowed by the younger men. While the middle group possess neither the power of the elders nor the education of their younger brothers, the young men, as a group, have achieved considerable education.[31]

These young men of Satkhira town, however, are no different from their brothers and fathers in dissociating themselves from the village Christians who during parish youth meetings were kept at a distance.[32] The young villagers, especially those wanting to improve their situation, encounter even

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28 " When Fr. Fagan was here they refused to be labelled 'Rishi Christians'. This could have been a positive attitude, but in reality it proved merely a cover up, because they have never been able to accept those coming from outside, e.g. catechists from Faridpur who have been here for more than 20 years. They themselves came to tell me that Nanak (catechist from Barisal, of Namasudra origin), is not a 'local' (*sthai*). I reminded them that no one is local in Satkhira centre since everyone comes from outside, and told them that when they created all that fuss for having been called 'Rishi', it was nonsensical since they themselves, as a group, exclude outsiders...." (Ibid.).

29 " When some of the catechists have been courageous enough to react, they have then had to endure retaliation and menaces. One of them has reproached the *matabbars* for all the illicit activities which are thriving with their consent and encouragement. They started pursuing him, setting traps for him ..... It is difficult for the catechists....." (Ibid.).

30 " Even in the liturgy the priest cannot be innovative without causing a scandal..." (Interview with Fr. J. Alvarado, Khulna 13 -3- 1989). When women had been invited to read the Scripture during mass, or they presented the offerings with a local dance, many men reacted by saying that women were too provocative for them.

31 Out of 50 young men in 1989, 20 had passed Matric exams and 7 were studying at college for B.A. Nevertheless, ".... a young Rishi Christian who wants to continue studying and stays here in Satkhira, not only has to face the hostility of the school environment, but must also struggle with his own *samaj*...." (Ibid.).

32 This was particularly noticed by Fr. Alvarado when, on August 15, 1987, a group of 101 youth met in Satkhira; both at lunch and supper time, the minority representatives coming from the villages ate separately from the others.

greater difficulties than the youth in the centre,[33] and if they manage to further their studies, they meet with the opposition of the *matabbars*, who will never surrender their authority: "If someone says a little bit more than his due, he is put down by a technique which here is still valid: 'how do you dare question the words of your elders?', and with this, the whole *samaj* is silenced...".[34]

Power of the *matabbars*: *bicar*

The *bicar* (community trial) remains the most important display of the *matabbars*' authority. Usually both groups of *matabbars*, those prosecuting and those defending, reach an agreement even before the trial starts, to safeguard either their interests or those of a particular individual. The oldest *matabbar* presides over the trial, even though it may be a younger one who directs proceedings.[35]

> ... If the culprit is a poor devil he will bear all the blame; if, however, a prominent person is involved, the *matabbars* will use all their skill to manipulate the whole trial and find someone else to blame... Often the *matabbars* contact the accused before the trial to reach an agreement whereby they can gain something, and when they are unable to unravel the muddle, they throw it back at the Father who, if present, is called to solve the case. We try to stay out of it, even if it is a moral-religious matter. We must be careful how we choose our words, because the trial has often been manipulated in such a way that an innocent person is made to seem the culprit. Once I assisted at a *bicar* in which a man was accused, simply to defend another, the real culprit, who was supported by the Muslims. So, to save themselves from the repression of the Muslims they accused an innocent man. Sometimes this is what appears to an external observer, but later, in private, they try to put things into perspective....[36]

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33 "Their youth is very short indeed, since at 18/20 they marry, and although the age is tending to increase to 21/23 there are very few young men above 20 who are not married. For girls the age is reduced to 16/18. .... The young men from the village want to improve, but they encounter many limitations: firstly, those who can continue studying are very few and, secondly, they are still considered 'Muchi' .... In many villages they still practise the 'trade of the caste', eat carrion (*mara mamsa*), and probably some still poison cows. When a young man sees his own people continuing these activities, it becomes difficult for him to find an honourable job.... He could never sell in the bazaar, for instance, because others would not buy anything he touches....." (Interview with Fr. J. Alvarado, Khulna 13 -3- 1989).

34 "... There is a desire for education in all, but I don't know to what extent this is so simply because the mission bears the expenses. ... There are only a few who are ready to make big sacrifices to educate their children. Furthermore, when young students go to college and mix with others, maybe involving themselves in politics, or being more open in relationships with the opposite sex, at that point the reaction of the *Matabbars* and others in the village is: '*Apnar cele, apnar mee, dhekun*!' (Have you seen <u>your</u> boys and girls?). It all comes back in my face: 'You made them study, it's your fault!'. This reveals a clear mentality which will die only with them. I think that Fr. Koster used to say the same of the *Matabbars* in his own time...." (Interview with Fr. G. Gobbi, Satkhira 12 -2- 1989).

35 After a general introduction, the two parties involved give their version of events. Then, clarifying questions are asked both by the *matabbars* and the general public. If everything proceeds clearly, the culprit is found guilty and condemned, generally, to pay a fine or to offer food to the *matabbars*.

36 Problems seem to increase when the leaders themselves are put on trial by the rest of the community, as happened in Dhandia where a young man, who contracted a court marriage in India, was given another wife by the *matabbars*. "... During this last period I have realised that the *matabbars* try to provoke problems for material gain. Their role is not meant to build up the community and to keep internal order..... It seems that they have not realised what happened within their community with the advent of the missionaries: they try in all ways to hang on to their power, and only when a difficult situation arises, especially at a financial level, is the Father asked to intervene, so the payment is guaranteed. It is not a solution they are after, but only the money, because they will decide, and their word will be final. Thus, even in this case, they never lose their power ...." (Interview with Fr. G. Gobbi, Satkhira 12 -2- 1989).

The missionaries seem aware that temporary appearances in a given station mark their weakness, since the *matabbars* are there to stay,[37] and are needed, despite their 'cunning attitude' - revering the missionary when he is present and destroying him when he is absent.[38] In this "troubled dialogue" the negotiation of power between the missionary and the leaders has been compared by the missionaries to a bull-fight,[39] with the missionary the fighter, and the Christians the spectators. Although it is the bull who is meant to die, Satkhira has seen many casualties among the missionaries. The irony of the situation is that these Christians have no wish for a local priest to replace the foreign missionary, firstly because they know that material help comes from abroad and secondly, because "they have an instinctive lack of confidence in their own countrymen".[40] Furthermore, the "moral authority" of both young catechists and missionaries is weak,[41] not least because the model of a western church which went through secularization and democratisation was, according to some, in contradiction with the Bangladeshi reality where authority is paramount.[42] At an inter-personal level the opposition between the missionary and the leaders is seen in terms of their different 'cultural mentality'.[43] The missionaries' 'clear and distinct ideas' of moral law, resulting from an equally clear philosophical and

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37 " The power of the missionary is a fictitious power..... The real authority comes from the *matabbars*. There might be moments when they negotiate and seem to lose ground, but they are only preparing themselves for the next move. They are not interested in winning a single battle, they want to win the war. They might give some respite, when they show repentance for what they have done wrong, but they never let go of power..... According to the people, the missionary is a *bidesi* (foreigner) and cannot understand. The people, on the contrary recognise the undisputed authority of the *matabbars*. Furthermore, the missionaries make a temporary appearance among them, the *matabbars* are there to stay....." (Interview with Fr. E. Garcia, Khulna 11-2-1989).

38 " When they are caught red-handed, they will ask for forgiveness, but they are not sincere, because they say it easily, frequently and nothing ever changes. When the situation presents itself again they just go through the same procedure. In short, they think: 'Since you think that I acted wrongly I ask your forgiveness, so that you cannot go against me when I next need your help and protection...'..." (Interview with Fr. Caldognetto, Khulna 18-6-1989).

39 This image is reported by Fr. Garcia, a Spanish Xaverian who reached Bangladesh in 1981 and had been working in Satkhira between 1983 and 1986 (Second interview with Fr. Garcia, Khulna 17-6-1989).

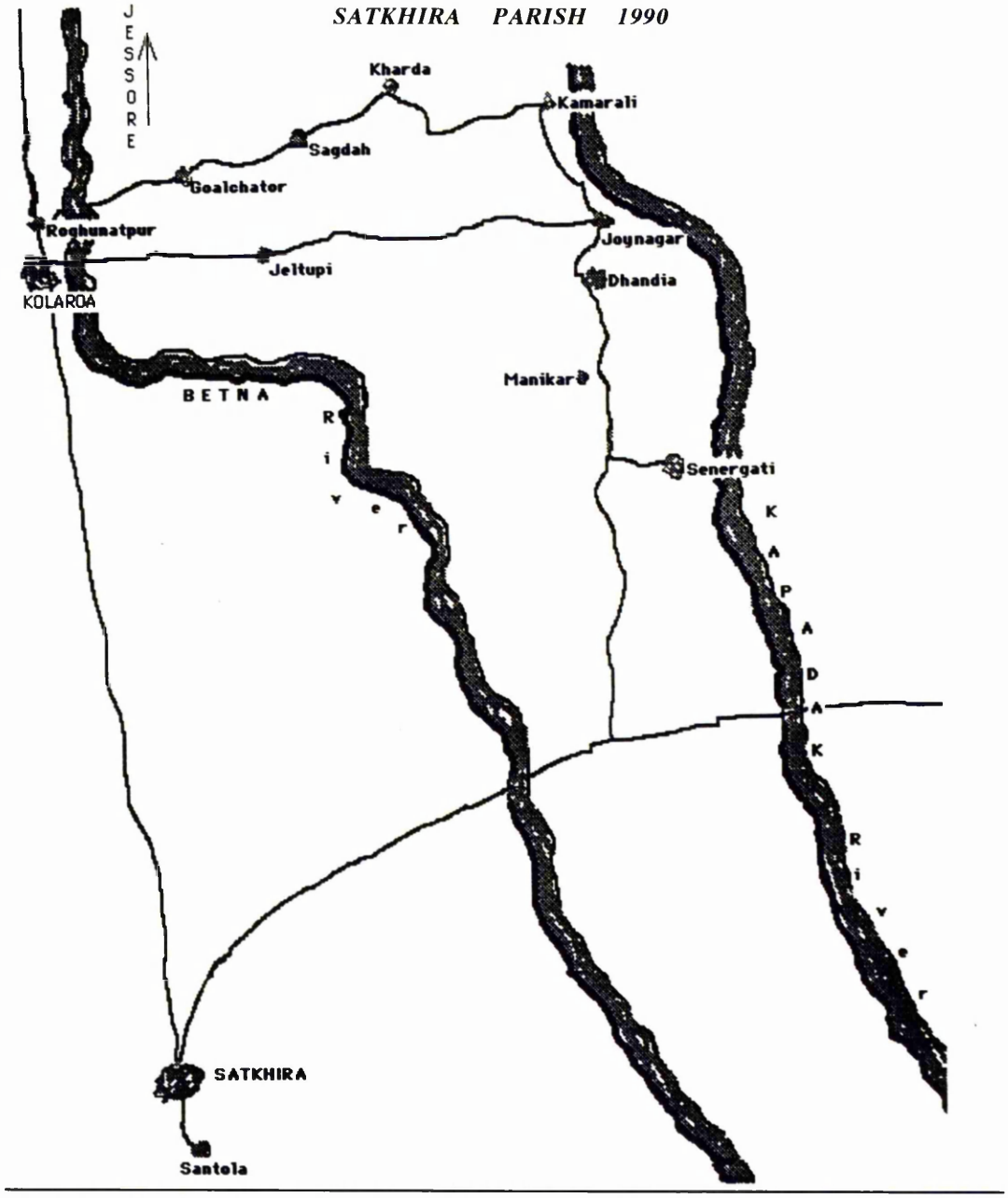
40 ".... It will take a long time before they accept a local priest, or a fellow Rishi who becomes priest, and respect him as a *Guru*. We are respected because of our skin colour, but when this is lacking I don't know what could happen. ..... We have here experienced the situation of Fr. Joachim [a Rishi priest from Simulia, who spent some time in Satkhira], who in certain villages was totally rejected by the people because he sided with the missionary over certain issues. Furthermore, he understood their mentality and their language much better and could not be cheated. The people themselves lamented that 'unfortunately he is one of us (*amaderi ekjon*) and we cannot fool him'. They are of the idea that foreigners can be easily tricked...." (Interview with Fr. G. Gobbi, Satkhira 12 -2- 1989).

41 "...Our catechists, who are sent to a village to represent the priest, being 20-23 years old and, maybe unmarried, hold no moral authority at all, and yet we ask them to control everything. .... I have doubts on the efficacy of our method of intervention both at a social and religious level, since we are not responding to the needs of a particular past experience and to the ideas they share on 'religion'. The figure of the *Guru* seems a distant figure for a young Xaverian who reaches this part of the world without knowing the nature of his role and whose preparation has not equipped him to grasp this situation..... When he discovers that a religious truth is founded on and proved by a series of convictions held by these Christians, he soon realises that the moral authority of a *matabbar* is considered far superior to his own authority when he is saying Mass.... If they listen to the missionary, this is done to keep both him and the catechist happy, so that in return they will receive help... He comes to this place as a foreigner, and he will remain so....." (Second Interview with Fr. Garcia, Khulna 17-6-1989).

42 This same reasoning was applied by Fr. Garcia to the attitude of those missionaries who, during the 70s and 80s, brought much confusion among the Satkhira Christians with their eagerness to apply Vatican II renewal to a community which was still discovering the essentials of its faith. This might also explain the negative reactions of many, especially among the elders, towards innovation and liturgical change.

43 "The mentalities and practical situations of *Matabbars*, mission employees, catechists and Fathers are diverse and even opposite. The behaviour of Bangladeshis and foreigners is different. The Bangladeshis, in the heat of the moment, get angry and upset, and they fight easily. Nevertheless, in the twinkling of an eye every fault or offence will be forgiven.

theological rigour, contrast with the Rishis' understanding which expects 'unconditional forgiveness' (*doya*) from a man of God. They can feel they can rebel with impunity against the missionary, but before the rest of society they are mute. ".... When the Rishi are reminded by others of their place in society, they try to change the subject.... It is as if they are killed as persons, because they are paralysed and cannot answer...".[44] It seems that quarrelling with the missionary is not without its positive aspects for the Rishi.



On the other hand, if the Fathers get angry, they will never forgive even when the people at fault repeatedly ask for forgiveness" (Interview with Mr. Gregory Benarjee, Khulna 7 -7-1989).

44 Interview with Br. G. Gamba, 14-2-1989.

Religious awareness and missionary identity.

The Rishi transition from Hinduism to Christianity was ambiguous and they brought to their understanding of Christianity many Hindu elements. According to the missionary, in all the northern villages[45] the 'Hindu mentality' remained very strong, not only in terms of *puja* participation, but especially in the field of marriage, since many did not wish to follow the Christian rules in this matter but established alliances with the Hindu Rishi, following the latter's ritual.

> .... It is in marriage matters that their Hindu mentality is most visible. There are economic and other factors which push them to act in this way, but more than this, it is what they themselves call '*rakter than*', or the strength of the blood, which is a force that they cannot control...[46]

While religious ceremonies such as Sunday Mass, considered important and compulsory for Catholics, are not respected, other rites (*sobhaprartana* and Good Friday's Adoration of the Cross) acquire for them great importance.[47] Here too, as in the case of Simulia, everything points to a religiosity which finds its highest expression in *Bhakti* or, as they themselves say, in *Bhaktite Mukti* (Salvation through Devotion), and when Christianity becomes demanding - so the missionary maintain - they reject the 'foreignness' of this discourse.[48] Fr. Gobbi's response to this is to make his community understand that "Christianity is a foreign (*bidesi*) discourse" both for him as an Italian and

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45 The far northern villages of Kamarali (130 Christians), Kharda (195 Christians), Sagdah (153 Christians), and Goalchator (112 Christians in 1988) exemplified more than any other, according to the missionary, those Rishi who "had never left Egypt, but who were quite pleased with their situation". Whilst the Kamarali people, including their catechist, had been labelled by Fr. Gobbi 'peaceful atheists', the community in Sagdah was under the yoke of the Muslims, especially the Kha family, and "had no intention of crossing the Red Sea...". In Kharda some families, involved in selling hides, were urging others to 'return' to this business, but the angry reaction of the local young men prevented them from doing so. In 1987, a dead cow was brought into the village and these young men dragged it out by force, cut it into small pieces and threw it away. The temptation to eat carrion is very strong for all these Rishi Christians, particularly during difficult times, and despite the desire of many to stop this habit which "destroys their image in the face of others", some continue the practice. The 'place of honour' in this matter was, however, occupied by Manikar village - West of Senergati (167 Christians in 1988) - where not only did the people eat carrion but they still carried on poisoning other people's cows. At the end of 1987, the catechist discovered *mara mamsa* (carrion) in the houses of eleven families. If, however, we take into consideration the poor socio-economic status of this community, compelled to live on Muslim land and work as labourers for the landowners, we can at least understand, if not justify, their activity. The case of Manikar seems very similar to Bodkhana (Simulia Parish): here too, poverty and oppression prevent this community from opening up to others, and this is reflected also in their lack of interest in education; in fact, not one single student from this village goes on to further their studies. To a lesser extent, the trading of skins and the consumption of carrion were also practised in Jeltupi (178 Christians in 1988), a village on the road from Dhandia to Kolaroa.

46 Moreover, there were other factors which escaped the missionary's control in these villages, such as the "suspicious commerce of women" who from Goalchator used to go to India, and the high level of prostitution of Christian women which was going on with the approval of the leaders and the local Christian village police (*Caukider*) (Interview with Fr. G. Gobbi, Satkhira 12 -2- 1989).

47 "The celebration of the stations of the Cross is felt and sensed with an aura of the highest emotion, even though brought here from the West. They participate in it more than the Mass, although it is at 5.00 p.m. and they have to stop working to come here. On that day they put their best clothes on, even the kids...." (Ibid.).

48 ".... This is their religiosity, through which they feel saved. After a religious gathering where they have prayed, sung and even cried, they feel at ease and saved..... The fact that being a Christian has consequences in practical life, does not bother them. This is even more evident when I ask them to show some effort in this direction and they retort that such discourse is valid for Italy and Europe, but not here. When Christianity becomes demanding - forgiveness, suffering, renunciation...- they decline by saying 'We cannot achieve such high standards (*Amra eto bhaddra hate parba na*)'. Once we invited a man to forgive his opponent - the bishop was also present - and we gave him many examples; his reaction was 'This is all very good, but it is too good for us (*adiritta bhalo*)'.... This religiosity whereby they feel saved, is something which comes from inside, an experience of purification and salvation that man gives to himself, rather than something which comes from outside and saves man. Some during special community meetings such as *prartana, amustan*, and even Mass, have the courage to confess publically that they will change their lifestyle: this is seen by all of them as the moment of salvation....." (Interview with Fr. G. Gobbi, Satkhira 12 -2- 1989).

for them as Bangladeshis because "it is a discourse which comes from God, and in this sense it exceeds every culture". The point - as Fr. Gobbi asks himself - is how much this discourse brought by the missionaries is "free from cultural constraints and how it can be incarnated in this local culture...".[49]

The Christians' need for *bhakti*, though understood but hardly endorsed by the missionaries, contributed to the creation of extra-ecclesial rites,[50] a sort of parallel religiosity, meant to accommodate their belief in spirits and to appease malefic forces which never ceased to exist in their minds. Moreover, some missionaries doubt " to what extent they really believe in the effectiveness of the sacrament of priesthood", as compared to a line of spirituality of *sannyasis* and *pirs*, who adhere to an age-old religious tradition which has kept its vitality over many years. This, besides producing a crisis in missionary identity, reveals the weakness of Christianity which has been unable to create a community on the basis of Christian values.[51]

The many failures experienced by the missionary among the Rishi Christians - their passivity towards life, always awaiting help, reducing Christianity to the sphere of individualism, staying enclosed in their ghetto and seeking to negate their origins - gives him reason enough to doubt the effectiveness of his presence among them.[52] On the other hand, a continuous presence within a community[53] revealed that if, at times, religion for these Christians was perceived as a non-value ("I think that religion for them has no meaning, both their previous religion and the present one...."), at

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49 Ibid.

50 Reflecting upon the extra-ecclesial rites the Rishi used to celebrate both in Khulna and in Satkhira villages, Fr. Garcia pointed out that the missionaries needed many years yet to come to terms with what was going on among their Christians, and that even the local priests were not very interested in bringing these matters out in the open. Among the rites celebrated by the Christians in Satkhira there is some sort of 'purification rite' for women after childbirth, according to which the woman has either to pass through fire or fire is passed between her legs. This was discovered by chance when a young woman from Kharda, sister of a seminarian, had to be taken to hospital in Dhaka with severe burns. Fr. Garcia who at that time met T. Blanchet, an anthropologist specialising in rituals of birth in rural Bangladesh, asked her about this incident, but she could not find any comparison with other areas of Bangladesh.
The rites celebrated by the Rishi Christians in Khulna, refer to a meeting in which young people are given alcoholic substances (*mod*) and act later as 'possessed by the spirit of God'. Apparently the Bible is also used in these meetings more as an object to be thrown in the air than as a source of inspiration. Fr. Garcia received first-hand accounts of this, even though he, as a priest, could not be an eye-witness himself (Second interview with Fr. Garcia, Khulna 17-6-1989).

51 ".... The religious aspect of our people is discouraging. As a priest you are valued not as a person but in so much as you can give something to them. Those whom they remember most are those who have emptied their pockets... They talk of Seraphin [Fr. Dalla Vecchia] as a great man, because he gave much material help.... The religious factor seems to be a private matter: 'I settle things personally with God', they say, but the ecclesial and communitarian aspects are non-existent. Maybe this could also be seen as a reflection of their poverty" (Interview with Fr. D. Caldognetto, Khulna 18-6-1989).

52 "...My problem is not that I am afraid of being cheated by them, because they are in need of help, but whether I am really helping or merely contributing to their situation of dependence... Between them and us there is no communication at a human level. I think that we are operating at such a low human level that it is not possible for us to build the Christian until this basis has been sufficiently developed.... There are exceptions, but they are very few... " (Ibid.).

53 This was the case of two Luigine Sisters who in 1978 started residing in Roghunatpur (14 miles North of Satkhira) among some thirteen Rishi families who, being extremely poor, had been re-settled there by the Satkhira fathers: "It is important to stay among them with a continuous presence, because they are despised by others. Our style of presence should be directed more along the line of being rather than doing, in the sense that we should listen to them, and give them our time. In this way, we might come to understand them better. Unfortunately, moving with our own categories, we prefer to do things, and our time gets taken up with activities.... It is more important to listen, and this is what they ask for...." (Interview with Srs. Filomena Veronica and Pierangela, Khulna 25-11-1988).

others times, one noticed their need to establish a relationship with the divine, especially in time of need or when expressing their devotion in thanksgiving.[54] Indigence is not always an impediment for the poor to create community among themselves or does not always provide an excuse to fulfil only individual needs.[55]

The recent style of missionary presence among a small group, rather than the totality, was seen as a possible alternative to a mission where baptism and relief had become synonymous.[56] This would also encourage and communicate a sense of self-worth, since "until the Rishi do not believe that they are as worthy as others, they cannot expect others to respect them....". Both Fr. Gobbi and Fr. Alvarado were in agreement that it was the fear of being considered 'Muchi' that prevented the Satkhira Christians from achieving progress as well as a sound relationship with the rest of society, and when the missionaries tried to encourage the most active members to be a little more adventurous, it was almost with despair that they answered "*Amra Muchi* " (We are Muchi). In the missionaries' eyes, it is not so much the rejection of others, as the sense of inferiority they carry within themselves that obstructs any hope of success. This is seen in the lack of confidence in their own priests, since a 'Muchi' will never be a proper priest for them.[57] Equally, when a girl from a 'higher' community is married there, they doubt whether she will be able to endure their 'wickedness'.

It seems that, every kind of relationship between the Rishi and others is influenced by the Rishis' self-esteem and self-perception. Those who worked among the Satkhira boarding school boys informed me that, when asked about their parents' place of origin, these boys never refer to a village which can be easily identified as 'Rishi', but refer to Khulna, India, or simply answer that they do not know. If youngsters try to hide themselves by pretending ignorance, this must be even more painful for the adult Rishi who cannot avoid the topic yet still try to escape the stigma. It seems that, even prior to asking forgiveness for any fault, the Rishi feel the need to ask forgiveness for being what they are, i.e. 'Muchi'. Perhaps, a complete picture can be given when, apart from a sense of inferiority, we take into

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54 "... Kanai, for instance, never used to pray, but from the moment he bought a cow and things started to improve for him, he prays every evening to his 'Sacred Heart' image... Certainly they pray when they are in difficulty, since when they receive a favour they come to our chapel and leave a packet of sweets there... It is their way of repaying God for a vow they have made. .." (Ibid.).

55 " Once, the poorest among them gave his rice to a passer-by. Another time, this same individual went to the bazaar and bought bananas from a poor devil from whom nobody would buy... When these poor realise that there are other poor around them, they are able to help each other, as in the case of a Muslim whose house was burnt down, and for whom the Christians here collected 100 Taka.." (Ibid.).

56 ".... In certain villages, if you take the chapel away there is nothing to show them as Christians...We should first form the human person in them and later we can aim at the rest.... They need a sense of their dignity which they do not possess and this is what we should give first.... With those who are already Christians I would greatly reduce material aid to emphasise the distinction: being a Christian does not give one the right to receive help. It will be a most unpopular decision, but whilst we remain at this level of exchange with the mission, the religious side - their being a Christian - will never be seen in its true light. .... This is not a church but a bank. People come here to milk and this puts into crisis my identity as priest.... Never mind being a 'shepherd of souls', I am valued in as much as I give to them..." (Interview with Fr. D. Caldognetto, Khulna 18-6-1989).

57 Conversely, a Rishi from Santola decided to become Christian attracted by the privilege granted to the Rishi who could become priests (Second interview with Fr. Garcia, Khulna 17-6-1989).

account the continuous rejection experienced by the Rishi. As Daniel Master puts it: ".... Hindus and Muslims despise us or mock us inwardly and they do not always express it outwardly.... Those who are conservative have not changed their attitude towards us....".[58]

While conducting fieldwork in Satkhira I interviewed two of the most representative leaders of the community: the former headmaster Daniel Gain and his 'rival', Gregory Banerjee. Gregory's description of the geographical distribution of Christians, especially for Satkhira town, shows his awareness of separation not only by *para* but also by group of origin.[59] The economic situation of the people further emphasises a 'class' separation.[60] Gregory, in his capacity as a 'Brahmin' Christian employed at the Diocesan Central Office and as a leader pleading for others, reminds me, and the missionary with whom I was associated, of the Rishis' positive response to Christianity: "... The Christians tend to co-operate in all religious initiatives and they tend to stick to the rules and codes of Christian life...".[61] This serves to endorse these Christians' expectations to be fulfilled by those in charge:

> After fifty years of Christianity the people of Satkhira Parish hope that they will be transformed into a Christian *samaj* and *jati*.... They expect both material and spiritual salvation....

Daniel Gain - the old Satkhira headmaster - pointed out that only through a serious programme of education can the Rishi hope to compete with the rest of society. His account of events included a detailed description of the Rishis' situation before conversion and the many improvements achieved by the group. These, however, were conditioned in the current political climate by 'equal opportunities' which seemed denied to the Rishi.[62] Waiting for an utopian dream to come true, Daniel proposes, more concretely, that at least one person in every Christian family should continue in higher education, to

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58 Interview with Mr. Daniel Gain, Satkhira 15 -2- 1989. He said this in the full knowledge that the Jamati-i-Islam (Muslim Fundamentalists) was the strongest political party in Satkhira town.

59 " ...Apart from a few Namasudra families, from Narikelbari and Gournadi (Barisal area), two Gele (fishermen) households and a Brahman family (Benarjee) [Gregory's family], it can be said that all the Christians of Satkhira were converted from the Muchi-Rishi group....." (Interview with Mr. Gregory Benarjee, Khulna 7 -7-1989).

60 " The economic situation of the Satkhira Parish Christians cannot be defined as flourishing: although there are a few well-off families dependent on activities such as furniture making, welding and small trades -mainly in Satkhira town- the larger proportion of Christians depend on an income from agricultural daily labour, the traditional trade of leather and the making of bamboo fences and grass mats. They can thus be defined as poor or people living below the bread line..." (Ibid.).

61 The continuity of Hindu traditions and culture among the Satkhira Christians is judged by Gregory as a "natural consequence" and is revealed particularly "in the way they perform devotion to Mary or in many other aspects of the liturgy where they make large use of materials, symbols and ceremonies which take after the popular Hindu *puja*...". Furthermore, many of the *samajic* rites, such as weddings and funerals "are all still informed and performed in the Hindu way..." (Ibid.).

62 Daniel's metaphor for describing an egalitarian society refers to his place of origin, Sriula, a southern village close to the Sunderbon Forest: there all the trees reach the same height, even the young trees, because water and light are distributed in equal measure to all of them. Daniel made no reference to the *Bauali* - the people of the forest - who were certainly known to him, and who may represent the ideal society hoped for by the Rishi. The *Bauali* belong to all three *samaj* known in the area; they are in fact Hindus, Muslims and Christians when living in their own village, but as soon as they enter the Sunderbon their divisions disappear to become one single group, a community of people who know, respect and help each other. Even their religion becomes one when they enter the forest, since special gods and goddesses reign over this region. These people are well known in the southern part of the country and are praised for their courage and resourcefulness. Both the trees and the people of the Sunderbon recall the desire of the Rishi, even of the Christian Rishi, to 'be one again' with the rest of society (Interview with Mr. Daniel Gain, Satkhira 15 -2- 1989).

guarantee a significant improvement for the Christian *samaj*, and he presents a unitary view of progress for his people which does not separate religion from social betterment.[63]

Nanak Das, a Christian from Noakhali of Namasudra origin who worked among the Satkhira Christians as a catechist for over twenty years, had never been accepted by the Satkhira people as 'one of them', and his work often brought him into conflict with the Christians and the local leaders.[64] Despite these difficulties, Nanak considered the situation of the Rishi before conversion[65] as the result of one fact: "no social or human dignity was granted them.... they had to struggle to live". The new religion for the Rishi meant an opportunity "for salvation from poverty and superstition and an opening to human and social dignity".[66] Christians in general were judged positively by Nanak who appreciated the changes that had taken place in the community.[67] Among the Christian values which most appealed to the Rishi, according to Nanak, was "the belief that Christ gave his life to protect human dignity", and as far as this was upheld, peace reigned in the *samaj*. However, Nanak maintained that "the system of leadership adopted by the missionaries is not intelligible to many".[68] Among the many Hindu customs followed by these Christians, Nanak mentioned, in particular, the use of amulets, charms, and special water. Furthermore, they were very keen to fulfil vows made to a deity (*manat*), to visit sacred places, especially if a *sadhu* (holy person) or a *sannyasi* (renouncer) were present there, to participate in *puja* and eat the food offerings made to the deity. This would confirm what a Christian leader from Santola had said some time before to Fr. Paggi when asked to describe the Christian Rishi community: "We are like a snake which holds in its mouth a big frog ... too big to be swallowed ... and too good to let go".

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63 ".... From religion we expect spiritual, social and economic progress. At the time when our forefathers became Christians, they accepted this religion with the sole aim of getting protection from oppression and being freed from the influence of other religions. Even now religion gives us protection, and for that reason we hold on to it..... Then there is the spiritual side to it: when we follow it, we improve ourselves and we can mix with the rest of society and get respect from them..... This will be better achieved, however, only through better standards of education among our people... Without this there will be no change. Up to now the Rishi have received a lot of financial aid but there has been no development, because they do not have properly educated people. There is a common proverb which says 'Educated people do not starve to death'.... and this can well be applied to our community....." (Ibid.).

64 ".... If a person from any other group, or from earlier established Christian communities is employed there for missionary work, he is blamed for no reason at all. Bad propaganda is made against him and he is even publically insulted which tears apart his mind and spirit..." (Interview with Mr. Clement Nanak Das, Khulna 15-7-1989).

65 " ...They would celebrate *puja* of different deities in their own way, since true religion and civilised social system was unknown to them ... they would rejoice in taking *gaja*, *bhang* and *tari* (intoxicating drugs)" (Ibid.).

66 In this sense, the marriage problems felt by the community, though often provoked by both *matabbars* and parents, were caused through poverty, protection of the virginity of the girl, or fear of losing the boy.

67 ".... The educated youth, in particular, is prepared to go against the old social system. Many have learnt to protest against injustices, to read the bible and put it into practice, and to attend mass. They also express their wish to co-operate in missionary works..... Many people have understood that, as foreign aid is being reduced day by day, they have to become self-reliant as far as possible.... This is applied also to the sphere of Christian responsibility whereby ....we have to help wholeheartedly to build the local church...." (Ibid.).

68 ".... Village committees, parish council etc., are created but they become inactive within a short time. This effort on the part of the missionaries to build the local Church and their hesitation in designating responsibility among the people, becomes for the latter a source of agitation and frustration..." (Ibid.).

BARADAL 1978-1990

The turbulent history of the Baradal community continued during this period. Fr. Germano took up residence there in May 1978 and after two years alone, he was joined in 1980 by Fr. Colombara. Together they started a plan for rehabilitation of their community, which envisaged a 'purification' process whereby the people were urged to abandon poisoning cattle, eating carrion and skinning in the *para*. The reaction was immediate and the community divided between those in favour and those against the missionaries. The struggle persisted when Fr. Torresani replaced Fr. Colombara in 1983 and was further complicated by the intervention of the Bishop who asked the missionaries to reconsider their position in the interest of unity. Meanwhile, cases and counter-cases were filed in court by the two factions, with the compliance of the Muslim landlords who favoured the Rishis' divisions in the hope of appropriating their land. Eventually, the slow rebuilding of the community began. For this Fr. Germano used the idea of Exodus, which became an important symbol for the community. In 1990, however, Fr. Germano resigned because of lack of support by the Bishop preferring to start a new presence among the Hindu Rishi of the Kolaroa region. Later, in 1993, he became parish priest in the northern mission of Bhabarpara, well away from the Kabadak area.

1978-1980: A new start in Baradal

When accepting the challenge of residing alone in Baradal, Fr. Germano had in mind a different kind of community, closer to the people and their daily troubles. In fact, he decided to reconsider his initial plan of a moratorium and found an inspiration for his presence and activity in the Benedictine motto '*ora et labora*', translated into Bengali as '*Dharma* and *Karma*'.[1]

At the beginning of December 1978, Fr. Seraphin Dalla Vecchia[2] joined Fr. Germano for a short period, but given his poor health, the Bishop entrusted him with the sole task of 'praying and preaching'. Apparently, it was the desire to be a *guru* among the Rishi that had motivated his return to Bangladesh.[3] The people welcomed him enthusiastically,[4] offered their vows and observed fasting for his recovery. Fr. Seraphin's health, however, quickly deteriorated and on Christmas Eve 1978, he

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1 Germano, '*Relazione su Baradal 1978-1983*', *Baradal Parish Archives, BPA.*

2 Fr. Seraphin resided there from 1957 to May 1963, and kept up contacts with Baradal while in Satkhira during 1969-72.

3 "To be a missionary today in Bangladesh means to put oneself at the level of the people, trying to incarnate Christ in accordance with their feelings. Only if the priest is able to be like their *gurus* will he be listened to. Hindu temples are connected to a *guru* who died as a saint. Returning to Baradal, I would like to pursue this same ideal. ....." (Garello, S. *Cento villaggi per Serafino*, n.d.: 120).

4 "Yesterday I reached home greeted with joy and tears by my 'cobblers' (*scarpari*)..... The Bishop has asked me to simply pray and preach and I have accepted with resignation. I thank you immensely to have granted my return..." (Dalla Vecchia, Letter to Ferrari, 8-12-1978, *Notiziario Saveriano* 203, 7 -10- 1979: 274).

preached for the last time to the community of Baradal, who on that occasion participated *en masse*, coming also from the nearby villages. The church was lit for the first time with an electric power generator brought from Italy by Fr. Seraphin himself, and using this as a metaphor he recalled past events which for Fr. Germano presented all the characteristics of the biblical Exodus.[5] Eventually, Fr. Seraphin returned to Italy to die but he certainly accomplished his aspiration to become a *Guru* for the Rishi and this is how they still remember him.[6] The image of the biblical Exodus had occurred long ago to Fr. Germano, following his very first visit to Baradal (May 11th, 1978), when he noted a plan in his diary to lead the Rishi towards a promised land.[7]

In September 1980, reporting to the confrères on his activity,[8] Fr. Germano highlighted the geographical distribution of Christian communities, the socio-economic situation of the group,[9] various projects to solve the Rishis' economic impasse,[10] the complication of finding a market for the products, the difficulties of obtaining co-operation from the people,[11] and the complete failure of minor projects.[12] The women's credit unions were the only ones to prosper and they became centres for social and educational awareness, unlike the men's which, though started many times, had always

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5 "..... Naturally among the people there were the poisoners, the thieves, and the gangsters. There were also the *matabbars*, who consistently and in every possible way had put obstacles in Seraphin's work. At that moment, however, all felt redeemed by the return of their Father. Seraphin on that night started by saying "I have brought you light...", and that light was the symbol of a clearer light which was to illuminate the path to be walked together. Then, he continued: "We have made many mistakes, both you and I, but we cannot live without making mistakes; the important thing is not wanting to repeat them....". Referring to the life history of the people with some significant episodes, he compared their situation to that of the people of Israel as slaves of Farhao in Egypt. Everyone felt consoled and redeemed by those words, and nobody showed resentment for his calling them repeatedly 'Muchi'. He could get away with it, because he had become one of them...." (Garello n.d.: 126).
Soon after, Fr. Seraphin was transferred to the Jessore Fatima Hospital and on February 1979 he returned to Italy where, at the age of 53, he died on April 24, 1979.

6 "...The fact that Seraphin is still alive in the mind of the people can be explained only in one way: he treated them with a warmth which touches the roots of one's being, he loved them. In this case love becomes a strength which transcends the sole human capacity of the heart. To love a 'Muchi' means to be ready to be cheated, giving everything and receiving injury in exchange. It means to believe in them, to have that faith in them which they themselves do not have the courage to profess..... So many have repeatedly told them that they are a sub-human species that they have ended up accepting it as reality. This is the greatest hindrance to their social uplift. Seraphin had started with them a path towards liberation, right here in Baradal ...." (Germano, in Garello n.d.: 138-39).

7 Germano, '*Diario*' (Personal Diary), 11 May 1978.

8 Cf. Minutes, Xaverian Meeting, 9-9-1980, *XAK*, File 11-12.

9 "...Our people are landless, and, generally speaking, they do not appreciate the value of land nor do they know how to cultivate it. Some run a business as skin dealers, with the help of moneylenders (*mohajans*), to whom they are always in debt; a small group work as cobblers, and, particularly here at Baradal, many work at the local bazaar as coolies; in the villages, instead, the majority work with *cac* and *bet* (mats, baskets and fences of bamboo). A good number of them have formed band parties and go around playing at marriages and Hindu *pujas* for 4-5 months a year; there is one such group in every village and three groups in Baradal itself. Here in Baradal some are also barbers at the local bazaar...." (Germano, *Relazione su Baradal 1978-1983*, *BPA*).

10 Two main projects were the 'Sewing Centre' for women and the 'Mats Project'.

11 Though the catechist Mati had from the start carried all the burden of responsibility, it was only lately that the men were becoming aware of this: "...For the first time [in two and a half years], it has been realised that this work does not belong to the Father and they have seen the need to create a managing committee which will be in charge of running the Mats Project" (Germano, *Relazione sull'attività svolta in questi due anni e mezzo a Baradal*, Personal Diary, and *BPA*).

12 A small shoe factory at Baradal, and investments in bamboo handicrafts in the villages both had to be abandoned.

failed. Pastoral and religious activity was carried out with the help of five teacher-catechists with whom Fr. Germano had established a friendly relationship, but he maintained that the number one problem was the people themselves, "a particular breed of people", and in need of Exodus.[13] One of his first targets was to involve the *matabbars* in every activity, working in close contact with them. His final request was to have another confrère assigned to Baradal, and this was granted one month later, despite misgivings,[14] when in October 1980 Fr. Peter Colombara[15] joined him in Baradal.

1980-83: "The Revolution will come from the South."[16] Land for the *Bhumihin* (landless) and fight against the cattle poisoners

This period was characterised by the campaign the two missionaries started in favour of a 'clean environment' in Baradal, which meant renouncing skinning cows in the *para*, eating carrion and, especially, poisoning cattle. This programme became a major concern for Fr. Colombara, after Fr. Germano's departure in the spring of 1981 for a six-month rest; the Christians were repeatedly asked to take a clear stand on this issue,[17] and the Bishop was invited to 'understand' "the 'Muchi' culture...."[18]

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13 ".... The essential priority to start a religious itinerary is to be freed from slavery. As long as the Jews were in Egypt, under the bondage of the Pharaoh, theirs was a dead religion. Religion came alive only at the moment of Exodus. This process of liberation seems a very long one for our people and far away....." (Germano, *Relazione sull'attività svolta in questi due anni e mezzo a Baradal*, Personal Diary, and *BPA*)).

14 The assembly asked if the presence among the Rishi was to be considered a priority and if another Father was to go there, would this involve only parochial and pastoral activity or would it concern a more extensive missionary activity, for instance among Hindu Rishi? Was there any plan to co-ordinate a massive presence among the Rishi with programmed personnel so as to guarantee a continuity of presence? Should the Bishop not be involved in this plan of activity, or was there a need to 'evangelise' the Bishop first? (Cf. Minutes, Xaverian Meeting, 9-9-1980, *XAK*, File 11-12).

15 Germano, Letter to the Bishop, 6-11-1980, *BPA*.

16 ".... He [Fr. Colombara] often used to say: 'the revolution comes from the South' (cf. Colombara, P., 'Baradal Straw Mat Small Industry', Project presented to Caritas, 7 August, 1981, *BPA*.), meaning in this case Baradal. The substance of this revolution of his was to overturn the present social system based on open injustice. In addition to conscientization, another means employed by him was to give a piece of land to the *Bhumihin* (landless people). ... In preparing the documentation, however, he realised that it was not so simple: the *Bara Nayeb* of Buria had asked 8,000 Taka of *ghus* (bribe)..... On that occasion, Peter [Colombara] asked Gregory [Benarjee, Diocesan Officer of land property] to write a protest letter to the O.C. [Officer in Charge] of Asasuni, with a copy to be sent to the *Bara Nayeb*, in which the latter was accused of asking money which belonged to the poor. This letter had a surprising effect, but also disagreeable consequences for us: not only have we been unable to obtain the land of Buria and Majdkur, but the important people of Baradal, incited by the *Bara Nayeb*, started a process to void our property deed on the Baradal *Khas* Land, in which we were building the School and the Community Centre....." (Germano, *Relazione su Baradal 1978-1983*, *BPA*).

17 "... Peter had shown intuition on a basic problem of our people, about which as yet there is no common understanding or, at least, no common pastoral action. In brief, he maintained that those who, from being Muchi had become Christians, had to abandon in full the actions of the Muchi, i.e. Poisoning, Skinning and Eating carrion, since these three activities have strict connections among themselves ... During a general meeting with the people, Peter came out with the idea of the 'sign board': 'What sign board, - he asked, - should we have at the entrance of our *para*, 'Christian *Para*' or 'Muchi *Para*'?' And he urged the people to answer. A few months later I left for Italy and Peter continued this discrimination policy: those who wished to remain in the fold, had to renounce the three Muchi activities....." (Germano, *Relazione su Baradal 1978-1983*, *BPA*).

18 "We held a general meeting in the Church and in front of everyone I reported on the socio-economic, religious and ... cultural situation of the people. He has agreed that education and conscientization are needed...." (Colombara, Letter to Fr. Germano, 27-6-1981, *BPA*).
The Bishop, writing to Fr. Germano, informed him of the outcome of his visit to Baradal: "... I had a sort of meeting with the people which had been arranged by Fr. Peter. One main point was the fight against the people eating dead

and to back the missionary in his struggle. The campaign against poisoning, however, was unlikely to produce results unless the people were offered alternative means of livelihood: a plan was drawn to expanding the 'Mats Project' to other villages and, possibly to Hindu and Muslim communities, since it was turning out a success.[19] In order to discredit those leaders who did not support his 'internal revolution', Fr. Colombara created a Parish Council "adapted Baradal style".[20] The enterprise resulted, however, in complete debacle: the Bishop neither supported his fight[21] nor did he help in acquiring land for the *bhumihin*;[22] some were ostracised from the community[23] and invited the 'New Apostolic Church' to Baradal;[24] the mats project, without the support of Caritas, failed.[25] Furthermore, Fr. Colombara was disappointed with the formula '*dharma-karma*' and the way pastoral activities had been carried out with an emphasis on 'sacramentalisation'.[26]

When the Catholic representatives and those of the New Apostolic Church met at the end of December 1981, divisions deepened and while the former defended the missionaries' position, the latter not only challenged the missionary, but accused the Catholics of remaining faithful for material gain. This led to a split within the community which, though originating in the ban on 'illicit activities', was rooted in a power struggle for scarce resources.[27] This reality of a divided community forced Fr.

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cow or poisoning cows. Fr. Peter has been waging a persistent and strong fight against these evils....." (D'Rozario, Letter to Fr. Germano, July 21, 1981, *BPA*).

19 "... The campaign against the *Tipni* [poison used by the Rishi] *et alia* is in operation, and I think that by insisting and proposing alternative jobs the Muchi (*la muceria*) will find redemption...." (Colombara, Letter to Fr. Germano, 1-7-1981, *BPA*; cf. Colombara, 'Baradal Straw Mat Small Industry', Project presented to Caritas, 7 August, 1981, *BPA*). "... The work of the *Madur* (mats) this year has opened the eyes of many among our people who finally seem ready to follow a 'new path', without waiting for help from the Father....." (Colombara, Letter to Fr. Germano, 14 -9- 1981, *BPA*).

20 Five members were elected by the missionary and only two by the people, and these two needed the approval of the Father.

21 Fr. Colombara lamenting the Bishop's attitude remarked that: "he does not try to understand the morality of the Muchis', killers of cows...." (Colombara, Letter to Fr. Germano, 13-7-1981, *BPA*).

22 "... What has affected me most during this last period, however, has been the attitude of the Bishop; with the excuse that you as parish priest are not here, he has postponed the construction of the school and the community centre. Moreover, the *Bhumihin* have lost forever a great opportunity...." (Colombara, Letter to Fr. Germano, 14 -9- 1981, *BPA).*

23 ".... I have for a time been conducting a campaign against poisoners and skinners of cows in the Christian *Para*, and for this reason twelve people have been excluded from the Mats Project and the community.... These sanctions have alarmed the Bishop who, having at first declared in front of everyone -at my request- that this activity was *'maratta pap'* (mortal sin), now does not seem to condemn the social side of this sin as such.... " (Ibid.).

24 Germano, *Relazione su Baradal 1978-1983*, *BPA*.

25 Colombara, Letter to Fr. Germano, 19 -8- 1981, *BPA*.

26 " I am afraid I do not share your plan of *DHARMA* and *KARMA*. With this, I am not suggesting that you should accept my own view. I don't know if this could be a positive point of departure for some serious research we might conduct together....." (Colombara, 2nd Letter to Fr. Germano, 23 -7- 1981, *BPA*).

27 Cf. Minutes of discussion/meeting in Baradal *Para* (in Bengali), 30-12-1981, *BPA*. This was also confirmed by a 'Socio-Economic Survey of Baradal Village' conducted during 1982 by Fr. Colombara. (Colombara, Socio-Economic Survey of Baradal Village' (in Bengali), n.d., *BPA*; cf. 'Survey on money borrowing', April-May 1982, Baradal, *BPA*).

Colombara to reflect upon the inadequacy of the Church, both as an institution and as a people of God, to present the 'Good News' "as total liberation of the socially and economically oppressed",[28] given that the Baradal Christians, rejected from the rest of society, also held a self-rejecting image.[29] This attitude was further reinforced by the "atomistic type" of society experienced by the Rishi, where interpersonal relations outside the family, or at best the *gusthi*, "are characterised by suspicion, contentions and envy". Given these premises, the missionary seems to accept his own defeat in trying to change "the world view and ethos" of the Rishi.[30] Having gone full circle, Fr. Colombara reaches those conclusions which other missionaries prefer to value from the outset. Thus, the "positive value of atomism" is that he can propose Christ as an 'Ideal man' for his Rishi Christians, and a 'turning point' for Baradal Pastoral Plan.[31]

Fr. Germano, later reflecting on the period spent with Fr. Colombara, questioned the 'strategy' adopted by the latter to induce the Rishi Christians to abandon their 'Muchi ways' without involving them in the process.[32] In order to encourage a Rishi change, Fr. Colombara had tried to expand the mat weaving project, which proved particularly successful since it involved men, who were mainly responsible for poisoning and skinning. The failure to expand this project, which excluded the ostracised Christians, led to its final collapse and it was never revived: "For Fr. Colombara it was one project like many others," Fr. Germano commented, "but for me it was very important because it had represented the first possibility of change for the group as such...".[33]

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28 ".... The majority of the population is made up of landless people (75%) earning their livelihood through petty trade or occasional seasonal employment on the land of the few big landlords. Increasing indebtedness, land fragmentation, unemployment, inflation and scarcity of all resources make it difficult for the landless to maintain traditional forms of livelihood or family relations. The transition from a subsistence to a wage-based agricultural system... forces women and children into the labour force in search of remunerative work that will compensate for the lack of other alternatives. The earning capacity is determined by wage-rates set by the landlords and the standard of living is subject to the same vicissitudes of inflation and high prices..... People's definition of basic necessities and actual existence of basic needs are gradually being reduced..... The cost of living index has risen from 100 in 1963 to 560 in 1975, while real wages have fallen from 100 in 1963 to an index of 66 in 1975..." (Colombara, 'An Exercise for the Formulation of a Master Pastoral Plan', n.d. *BPA*).

29 "... Behaviour and attitudes of the new converts have not changed much; influence and impact of casteism, reinforced with the present class-structure, is still working in the milieu ...This creates a vicious circle of lack of trust, lack of respect and faith. Unless the person is helped to change this, he will be perpetually a victim without self-direction. Cheating and dishonesty will be the outcome: it is the only form of survival...." (Ibid.).

30 " The preferred behaviour is that which maximizes security and preserves their relative position in the traditional order of things. New techniques or new institutions which upset this order, carry for the people the risk of losing their relative position. The many attempts at co-operative forms of working together, the many attempts for changing the traditional profession of skinning dead cows have failed due to these uncovered characteristics of 'social atomism'..." (Ibid.).

31 This reading of reality does not take into account the close net established by the Rishi to carry on their activities, and if 'atomism' can be seen as part of the entire picture, it does not explain all of it. If fact, the experience of Fr. Coni in Simulia tended to underline the opposite, where the individual almost disappeared in the life of the *samaj*.

32 "... The problem here concerns the time and the method of execution. .... One thing is very clear: the steps taken in this direction must be taken by them through a process of conscientization; if we impose this, we might have the impression of momentary success, but things will continue as before, since we cannot practise eternally the role of policemen in their midst...." (Germano, *Relazione su Baradal 1978-1983*, *BPA*).

33 Interview with Fr. Antonio Germano, Baradal 25 -2- 1989.

Upon his return, Fr. Germano needed to create an operative leadership for the Christian *samaj* since the Parish Council had been ineffective and the traditional *matabbars*, whilst defending the right of 'exclusive possession' of the missionary,[34] were unable to enforce decisions on the community,[35] for they were indulgent towards those who ate carrion and skinned cows in the *para*.[36] With the help of the youth Committee, not only did Fr. Germano expose those Christians who kept carrion in their houses, but denounced to the authorities those 'ostracised' Rishi who procured the meat.[37] During the days of turmoil that followed,[38] both sides filed court cases against each other, with the Sanas, the Muslim landlords of Baradal, siding with the ostracised Rishi, against the mission.[39]

The skinning activity of the Rishi has always benefited the Sanas on three accounts: firstly, the Rishi need the Sanas' money either to keep their trade going or to survive when cattle was unavailable; secondly, the Sanas, investing their capital, control the profitable skin market; and finally, by continuing this activity the Rishi can never change their position in society, providing cheap labour for the Sanas, who also control the Baradal market place.

The missionaries' struggle to eradicate poisoning, skinning and carrion-eating among the Rishi, therefore, had both social and religious implications: from a social point of view, the Rishi could 'save' themselves only by abandoning this trade, which not only labelled them as 'Untouchables', but also condemned them to a life as cheap labour for the landlords. From a religious point of view, the Rishi, living in a Hindu environment and themselves being of Hindu background, were in no position

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34 "... Subal, one of the *matabbars*, has the courage to say: 'We brought the Father here, so the Father and what he has, belongs to us'. Their blindness is immense, but I try to keep calm. I start by saying to the *matabbars* that as long as the committee concentrates on the Father and on how to get money out of him, the committee has already failed....." (Germano, '*Diario*', 8-10-1982, personal communication).

35 On November 19th, 1982, the Committee met to discuss various matters, but the central points were the *mara mamsa* (carrion) and *goru kata* (skinning): "... They have no political will to change seriously, and this is proved by the leniency with which they forgive these faults. If instead of giving the usual 5 *Taka* fine, they decided to ostracise these 'Muchi' from the *samaj*, we would obtain different results...." (Germano, '*Diario*', 19-11-1982, personal communication).

36 Though for the missionary the connection between skinning, eating carrion and poisoning was very close, the *matabbars* tended to be indulgent on two scores: firstly because no link could be proved between these activities and secondly, because they themselves needed to cover their own lapses in this matter.

37 ".... Everything started on Sunday evening [21 Nov. 1982]. The youth Committee in charge of finding out the *mara mamsa*, has got underway. In less than half an hour they have brought 5 *hari* (containers) full of carrion meat into the mission.... The culprits are summoned and with them arrive the others also belonging to the 'sect' of skinners, poisoners and carrion eaters; twelve in all ... The Health Officer writes a statement in which is stated how they brought the carrion to the *para*, emphasising that seven cows were brought in one day, and sold to others, whose names also appear in the paper. He invites those guilty to sign the statement, and one after the other all 12 sign...." (Germano, '*Diario*', 21/25-11-1982, personal communication).

38 "...During these days of turmoil, more than once, reliable sources have heard menaces against the Fathers, like: 'We want the Fathers' head' or "This time we will do to the Fathers as we do with the cows: skin them and lay the skin in the sun'. Fr. Peter has started a case against those who made these menaces, in particular against Narhari, Kubil, Anil and Prasal. Meanwhile, in the Bazaar, and precisely in Bacha Sana's shop, the group of the 'Muchi' are inventing fabrications against our people and particularly against us..." (Ibid.).

39 We have already met in the history of this mission the Sanas who, from the very start, back in 1937, wanted to prevent the conversion of the Rishi to Christianity, and thus opposed the activities of Frs. Mesaric and Dontaine and Fr. Koster later on.

to acquire a sense of self-worth until they had the courage to renounce easy ways of gaining money through their traditional calling. It was within this framework that on the night of 24 November, 1982, Fr. Germano addressed the Christian men of Baradal assembled in their church, urging them to remain united and to free themselves from the Sanas tyranny.[40] The Sanas reacted immediately by closing their *dokan* (shop) to the Christians working there as *khuli*, and police intervention was sought to protect the missionaries and the community.[41] Following a visit by the Asasuni Central Officer and the Satkhira S.D.P.O. (Superintendent District Police Officer) to the mission, a temporary truce was reached.[42]

1983-85: "No revolution, but patient waiting"

When at the end of January 1983, Fr. Osvaldo Torresani, on his first assignment in Bangladesh, replaced Fr. Colombara, Fr. Germano hoped to give life to a new Committee with more distinct aims and fewer hidden motives, but again the *matabbars* foiled the attempt.[43] On April 24th, the fourth anniversary of Fr. Seraphin's death, eight Rishi families returned to the fold[44] and on May 16, through the mediation of a Union Member, a compromise was reached between the Christians and the remaining ten ostracised families: court cases were dropped and an agreement was reached not to

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40 "... In the evening, on the initiative of Naren Mandal, we call a general meeting of our people in the Church. We talk about the gravity of this moment and the importance of staying united, since this time the revolt is against the Sanas, whose judgement we did not want to accept and who are going to take revenge in some way, giving their full support to the others. During the meeting those present are invited to renew in a personal and direct way their commitment to their faith and to the Christian *Samaj*. This is done by all - except Goni and Samuel - with much enthusiasm and determination. I opened the meeting saying that this is a unique occasion for us: either we win or we die together: if we all lose, we the Fathers, will have no other option but to leave here, and they will have to bow down again to the despotic power of the Sanas. But we possess the certainty of victory, because we are struggling for reason and justice. It is important to stay together, united in every circumstance. This will be the beginning of liberation from the Sanas' tyranny...." (Germano, '*Diario*', 27/29 -11- 1982, personal communication)..

41 On 27 November, 1982, the Regional Superior, Fr. Tedesco, visited Baradal and with both Fr. Germano and Fr. Colombara discussed a plan of action in order to deal with the situation, including the possibility of seeking "martial law" intervention, in force during that period in Bangladesh. It was decided that the following day Fr. Tedesco, accompanied by Naren Mandal, would go to visit the Central Officer and the Health Centre of Asasuni to hear of any new development and, as superior of the Xaverians, he would advise them that he would take measures to defend the missionaries by calling for the intervention, if necessary, of the Italian Ambassador.

42 "..... The SDPO appears jovial and well-disposed towards us. Thus we commence to present the recent happenings starting from the *mara mamsa*, the poisoning of cows and the events of the 22nd. In particular, the name of the Sanas comes up continually especially Iunus Sana, who sided with the 12 poisoners only because we refused to accept his mediation in the *mimamsa*. We explained why we could not accept him: firstly because he is not a representative of the Government and secondly, because every time we accepted his intervention we never obtained justice....After hearing our version, the two Officers take leave and go towards the Bazaar where they stop at Bacha Sana's shop to hear the others. After the mediation of the SDPO we get the impression that things have been taken seriously and we decided not to seek Martial Law intervention....." (Germano, '*Diario*', 27/29 -11- 1982, personal communication).

43 "... This new Committee was to be constituted in January, but a series of quarrels, in which the *Matabbars* were directly implicated, prevent this. Furthermore, the *Matabbars* conducted a *bicar* in such a way that the people's expectations for justice and the very authority of the leaders themselves were completely wrecked" (Ibid.).

44 "On the occasion of the 4th anniversary of Fr. Seraphin's death [April 1983], 8 families returned among us, including also Ajit who was appointed by the Bishop as school teacher. The other ten families remained separated, but they did not maintain any relations with the New Apostolic Church, so they are now simply 'Muchi', although the majority of them have been baptised...." (Germano, A., *Relazione su Baradal 1978-1983*, *BPA*).

introduce carrion into the *para.*[45] But there was no easy solution to this problem which was to bring more distress to the Baradal mission in the following years. Missionary intervention changed after the arrival of Fr. Torresani, the aim being "no revolution, but patient waiting".[46] Fr. Germano sought the co-operation of the *matabbars* in the creation of a Committee,[47] solely for Baradal, of which he was President and the Catechist the Secretary.

> ... I have chosen this formula to give a certain solidity to the Committee and also to avoid being cut out of the events of the *samaj*, since we have always maintained that there is no distinction between '*samaj*' and '*mandali*', ours being a '*Khristio Samaj*'... [48]

Whilst the priests in Simulia tried to overcome the separation between social matters and Christian commitment by opposing it from 'outside', as it were, Fr. Germano sought a solution from 'inside'. Both positions involve some degree of risk, as Fr. Germano himself recognised;[49] in his case the major risk came from assuming the role of self-appointed President, accepting his involvement in community affairs in the hope of providing its leadership with a more decisive orientation towards Christian values.[50]

On August 29, 1983, the 'Committee of the Eleven' spent half a day discussing the rules according to which the members would proceed, the central issue being banishing carrion, and dismissing Committee members when found guilty.[51] The 'new formula' was designed to undermine the unlimited power of the latter and to bring them within the fold of a '*Khristio Samaj*', where the

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45 Germano, '*Diario*', 20-5-1983, personal communication.

46 "... We do not have great pastoral aims but try to move with our feet on the ground, without showing off. No revolution, therefore, but patient waiting; a waiting which transcends us, because it is superior to us, which puts itself as much as possible within God's perspective, whose time is different from ours. Moreover, in our pastoral action we will try to pace ourselves with the people, involving them as much as possible in our journey together...." (Germano, *Relazione su Baradal 1978-1983*, *BPA*).

47 "... During August-September 1983, after 8-9 months of anarchy, in which the *Samaj* had been dissolving itself and returning to the jungle, after many attempts, we finally managed to create a new Committee, the 'Committee of the Eleven'..." (Germano, '*Diario*', 18 -2- 1984, personal communication).

48 "...When the past Committee was in charge, it happened that the Father was cut off from the most important occurrences of the *Samaj*, since he neither participated in their meetings, which were in any case very rare, nor was he adequately informed on the content of these meetings..."(Ibid.).

49 ".... This [new Committee] is a risky formula, given that one is involved in all vicissitudes, and this requires a great deal of patience and tolerance, but I think that, in wanting to walk a common path, it is necessary to go through this phase, taking on board all the risks..." (Ibid.).

50 The first positive outcome, according to the missionary, was that the three Baradal *Matabbars* were to elect one among them to be their representative on the Committee (which they did by appointing Naren Mandal), whilst another six representatives were to be elected from among the men by 'popular elections'. In this instance too, the risk involved was considerable, if we take into account the pressure put on the people by both the *matabbars* and the candidates. This is further revealed by the 'new feature' the missionary tried to introduce to the Committee, and which seemed to be heavily rejected: the election on the Committee of two women representatives.

51 ".... The focal point is the absolute withdrawal of the *mara mamsa* (carrion), for which concrete sanctions to punish the culprits are established. Should the culprit be a member of the Committee, besides receiving the punishment, he/she will be dismissed. These written rules are then presented to the whole community and unanimously accepted. As an immediate result of the application of this policy, three members, Abilas, Susil Halder and Mila, have been caught contravening the rules, found guilty and expelled from the Committee...." (Germano, '*Diario*', personal communication).

emphasis was put on the adjective 'Christian'. In fact, some time after three members had been dismissed from the Committee, there was a repeat occurrence with the dismissal of the *matabbars*' representative.

Apparently, with the creation of the Committee, a 'positive influence' was soon felt in the *samaj*, and the culprits eating *mara mamsa* were "inexorably caught, put on trial and punished". Furthermore, moral lapses were dealt with 'most responsibly' by the Committee, but one complicated marriage case, in which many favoured a civil marriage, was not solved in time, and resulted in a painful setback for the community.[52] The 'culprits' made common cause with the ostracised Rishi, and the Sanas took advantage of these internal divisions.[53] Court cases and counter-cases were filed by both parties,[54] disrupting once again the community and endangering the life of the missionaries,[55] who did not enjoy the support of their Bishop.[56]

Confrontation between the missionaries and the Bishop

During his pastoral visit to Baradal in April 1985, the Bishop made some remarks in front of the people and the leaders, minimising the significance of poisoning, skinning and eating carrion in favour

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52 ".... This incident will present a very painful turnabout for the Christian history of Baradal. To solve this, the Committee had met various times, summoning time and again the people involved. However, all attempts proved ineffective, exacerbating still further the reaction of the culprits...." (Ibid.).

53 "... This was the starting point of an alliance with the other group [the ostracised Christians], who warmly accepted Symol making common cause against us..... This happened, of course, with the external support of the Sanas, who had already given their support in the past every time there was someone opposing us... After this occurrence, the Sanas have manoeuvred even more...." (Interview with Fr. Antonio Germano, Baradal 25 -2- 1989).

54 In one such case, in February 1985 by Samuel - who by now called himself Symol - against ten of the most influential Christian men, the latter were accused of possessing fire-arms and ammunition, previously stored in the house of one of them. The offence was considered particularly serious at a time when Martial Law was in force in Bangladesh. At 2 a.m. the Police stormed into the houses of the 10 Christians and arrested them, keeping them in custody at the Sanas' shop in the Baradal Bazaar. One of the Sanas, Iunus, acted as mediator between the Police and the mission, and Mati, the catechist, was let free, after paying a ransom/bribe of 2,000 Taka. He reached Khulna to inform Fr. Germano about the happenings. The Khulna S.D.P.O. was contacted and he urged the Asasuni police to release the remaining nine men. All but one were set free and he was kept for 15 days at Satkhira Police station. Later, all the policemen who had taken the 2000 Taka ransom were instantly transferred, but matters could not be solved easily since the Sanas still had a grip on the Asasuni police.

55 ".... Once a month I had to go to Court, and it was not easy to get together all 10 of our people who had been accused. Then the separated 'Muchi' - Narhari -filed another case against us over the *khas* land we leased from the government, and started building a Kali temple on that land. ... We had a total of 5 cases going on at the same time ... Meanwhile, we were also busy building the river embankment and the Chairman (Sana) intervened to say that we had no rights over this land. He tried to destroy me in every way, since once I was eliminated he could control the situation even better. One Muslim came secretly to tell me that they wanted to place a new born baby and firearms in the mission to implicate me .... At this point I wrote to the Italian Ambassador - despite Fr. Torresani's disapproval at this move - and I sent copies of the letter everywhere. The Ambassador phoned the Superior Fr. Tedesco, who asked whether they should intervene, but I answered that it sufficed to know that I was protected. From then on the cases started to be solved. Our solicitor won the first case and the others were dropped. At the root of everything lay the matter related to poisoning, skinning and eating carrion...." (Interview with Fr. Antonio Germano, Baradal 25 -2- 1989).

56 "... During all this time, which lasted over one and a half years, both the Bishop and the Vicar General never showed their faces to support us....." (Ibid.; cf. Germano, Letter to the Bishop, 23-9-1984, *BPA*).

of a re-unification with the group of around twenty families which had separated from the Church.[57] After a baffling moment of disillusionment the missionaries left Baradal and wrote to the Bishop seeking clarification.[58] Since the missionaries had detected the Bishop's preoccupation with recovering those ostracised, they seemed determined to proceed only "after a suitable probation period, which we will fix, once their intentions are ascertained...". The Bishop answered that he would call a meeting of his Advisors to discuss this matter "in order to reach a well-considered decision" and requested that the missionaries return to Baradal and "carry on with the work there as best as possible".[59] As Fr. Germano was due for a period of rest in Italy, Fr. Torresani was invited to participate in the meeting with the Bishop and his Advisory body.

Fr. Torresani prepared for the meeting an extensive report to be pre-circulated among the Advisors, where he gave his view of events and stressed that the Bishop had spoken publically in front of 40 representatives of Baradal Parish without prior consultation with the two priests. According to the Bishop "only the poisoning of animals is a criminal and immoral act, while the skinning of these animals is a trade just like any other.... The poverty of 'our people' is a well-known fact, hence they could be excused when they resort to eating the meat of poisoned/dead animals....".[60] After giving a detailed description of the efforts over the past seven years to offer alternative jobs,[61] Fr. Torresani presented a note on carrion eating:

> ... Living in a Hindu environment, it is easy to understand the contempt for those who violate the sanctity of the cow within the existing social structure. This contempt is far greater towards those who poison cattle, and then eat the poisoned, decomposing meat...

According to Fr. Torresani, the Bishop had completely failed to understand this.[62]

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57 The prompt reaction of one of the leaders, the catechist Mati, was that the Bishop was no different from the Sanas, who wanted them to continue their 'dirty job' (personal communication).

58 ".... On your visit you made certain statements before village representatives, assembled from the different outlying areas of the Quasi-Parish. We find it impossible to carry on the work which had been entrusted to us, unless you can give some written clarification on the following points, essential to the people of Baradal, and essential for the coherence and consistency of the attempts made over the last seven years by the resident priests:
1) To eat meat from dead animals is sinful in so far as it is integrally related to the poisoning of these same animals for this specific purpose. It is a recognised fact that Baptised Christians do poison animals for this purpose within our Quasi-Parish, on a regular basis, and a clear affirmation of policy is necessary.
2) To write separately and in private a statement to our Catechists, Employees and School-Teachers, in order to give them support before our people, so as to dispel the confusion arising from some of the statements made during your recent visit...." (Germano-Torresani, Letter to the Bishop, 30-4-1985, *BPA*).

59 D'Rozario, to Frs. Germano and Torresani, 30-4-1985, *BPA*.

60 Apparently the Bishop had also criticised Fr. Germano for paying too much attention to the catechists, who had "greatly influenced him on this matter". At the same time, Fr. Joachim Mandal, later appointed to Baradal, shared the Bishop's position, thus leaving the two missionaries in a very difficult position. (Torresani, 'Report on the events..... of 16-20 April, 1985, Baradal', 12 -5- 1985, *BPA*).

61 These were completed with amounts of money spent by Fr. Germano and with the names of those who had been helped, including those who had distanced themselves.

62 Minutes Xaverian Meeting 13-14 May 1985, *XAK*, File 11-12.

After the meeting[63] the Bishop's position did not changed substantially: though poisoning of cows was to be considered a serious sin and a crime and, as such, "liable to punishment both by the State and the Church (e.g. by denial of the Sacraments)", skinning and eating carrion were not sins, unless they were "connected with the poisoning of the cows.... provided the fact is ascertained". [64] The Bishop's motives, however, were revealed when he clearly stated that "those Catholic families at present outside the Church should be allowed to come back".

Fr. Germano, reflecting later upon these events, maintained that those closest to the Bishop did nothing to urge him to take a stronger position on these matters and that the Bishop had taken advantage of a transitional period within the Xaverian community.[65] He saw the renunciation of their traditional occupation as "the most significant pastoral endeavour" in Baradal.[66] In this the missionaries were working along the lines of many 'Purification Movements' promoted by caste Hindus in Bengal from the last century to the present day, urging the Rishi to abandon their trade in order to join the *Hindu Mahashaba.*

1985-88: Rebuilding the community

Upon his return to Bangladesh in November 1985, Fr. Germano was re-appointed Parish priest,[67] not without a reminder "to be more faithful to the directives and desires of the Bishop".[68] In August 1986, the priests, Catechists and 37 representatives of the villages met in Jessore for one week to

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63 The meeting was held at Baradal on May 20. Besides Frs. Torresani and Mandal, and the Bishop himself, Fr. Rigali, Superior of the Xaverians, and Fr. Dri, Vicar General, the four catechists and a large crowd of Baradal men were present at the meeting.

64 The letter continued: "...Hence, for just skinning a dead cow or eating the meat of the same, one may not be sent or kept away from the Church, nor may one be denied the Sacraments. However, the *samaj* should do everything possible to eliminate the skinning of dead cows as *nangra kaj* (dirty work) and the eating of meat of a dead cow as against hygiene....." (D'Rozario-Dri, Letter to Fr. Torresani, 22-5-1985, *BPA*).

65 In fact, a month before his Pastoral Visit to Baradal, during March 1985, the Xaverians celebrated their Regional Chapter and Fr. Rigali replaced Fr. Tedesco as Regional Superior: "... With Fr. Tedesco as Superior, the Bishop would never have tried to make such an intervention, but he did it at a time when power was changing hands. Tedesco was fully aware of our situation, since he came here three or four times to see us, whilst the Bishop and his administrator did not show their faces for a year and a half, when we had all the problems, court cases etc... The Bishop did in a way go back on what he had said, but it was too late and the people understood that the Bishop had written that second letter, which was very non committal indeed, only because we had imposed it...." (Interview with Fr. Antonio Germano, Baradal 25 -2- 1989).

66 "...It should be emphasised that given the special circumstances of our people and the caste 'profession' which they practised (and which is abhorrent to others), it has been necessary to animate and lead a struggle for their liberation by forcefully encouraging the renunciation of their caste 'profession'. It could be said that this struggle (not yet over!) has been the most significant pastoral endeavour in this parish" (Germano-Mandal-Fagan, 'Pastoral Co-Participation: The situation of Baradal as seen by its Clergy', 25-8-1986, *BPA*).

67 Meanwhile Fr. Torresani left this mission, and Fr. Joachim Mandal continued there as Assistant.

68 D'Rozario, Letter to Fr. Germano, 11-7-1985, *BPA*.

discuss and adapt the National Pastoral Plan to the situation of Baradal.[69] The historical, socio-economic and religious analysis of the community was meant to favour Christian self-awareness and integration with the wider society. The results of this seminar were later published by the Training Centre in a booklet entitled 'In Search of Light'.[70]

Back in Baradal, the aim was to put into practice the plans agreed in Jessore with the intent of creating a proper Parish Council and encouraging greater self-reliance on the part of the people.[71] The role of the Clergy in the process of motivating the Rishi to struggle for freedom[72] was evident from the recent experience of Fr. Germano, who over eight years had embarked on bringing *dharma* and *karma* to the Rishi, but indicated the need for their greater co-operation.[73]

Exodus

During this period, the missionary was particularly busy in resettling two communities at Paikgacha and Goruikhali, and finding new space for young couples in Baradal.[74] By August 1986 in Goruikhali the majority of people had moved to a new site where homes had been built for them. The project to relocate the Alamtalla Christians[75] in the new environment at Paikgacha was also underway

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69 Fr. J. Fagan, who had recently returned to Bangladesh and had joined the Baradal parish for a period, was also present at the Seminar, together with Frs. Germano and Mandal. Among the 37 representatives of the laity.

70 '*Allar Anusandhane*, (Plan of Baradal Parish Pastoral Work), Jessore Training Centre, August 1986'. The subject of 'Light', which became the central theme of the Seminar, reappeared constantly as a reminder of the moment, in 1937, when the Rishi of Baradal had accepted Christianity. This was represented by a drawing of the boat of the missionaries coming downstream meeting many obstacles such as robbery, dacoity, 'dirty works' (*nongra kaj*, meaning poisoning, skinning and eating carrion), illegal marriages, relief mentality, lack of unity, use of spirits and *gaja*. Positive signs in contrast were represented by the River's bank where the Rishi took advantage of religious teaching, education, creation of co-operatives and credit unions, permanent missionary residence (starting with Fr. Seraphin in 1957), celebration of sacraments as a community, new land and houses. A signpost at the end of the River bore the date of 1987, the year in which the community was to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the presence of Christianity among them. Participation at the Seminar was encouraged and the evidence given by the elders proved particularly helpful in retracing the history of Christianity in their midst. In this respect, the testimony of Sudhanno's conversion from dacoity, was taken as a paradigm for the whole group.

71 Despite being the 'chosen poor' to whom the Good News was to be proclaimed, their concern for "worldly salvation" and their short-sighted awareness of the Christian religion did not help them to find "consequential application for their lives", their concern being " aggregation not conversion". (Germano-Mandal-Fagan, 'Pastoral Co-Participation: The situation of Baradal as seen by its Clergy', 25-8-1986, *BPA*).

72 " It is from this socio-cultural background that they are now attempting to struggle to overcome the psychological, social and economic oppression obstructing their liberation..." (Ibid.).

73 "[Fr. Germano]... So it happened that soon I became responsible for everything to do with their lives. All plans and decisions about what to do soon fell on my shoulders alone. This became an impossible task. I am more aware now that the people have to play a more active role in problem-solving.....This requires that we concentrate on the total human formation of the laity, prior to, or along with any practical steps especially involving finances..." (Ibid.).

74 Germano, 'Operazione Paikgacha', Letter to Mgr. Nervo, Director 'Caritas Italiana', 8-12-1985; Letters to Fr. Rigali, 4-2-1986/ 17-2-1986; D'Rozario, Letter to Fr. Germano, 28-2-1986, *BPA*.

75 Germano, Letter to Paikgacha Upozila Chairman, 14-4-1986, *BPA*.

and Fr. Germano hoped to complete the operation by Christmas 1986.[76] The long-awaited relocation of these Christians, had assumed great importance for the missionary who had always placed a particular significance on both a physical and spiritual experience of Exodus for his community:

> ... In two villages in particular have I sweat blood and tears (*c'ho buttato il sangue dentro*): Paikgacha and Goruikhali. Having seen the situation of the people in these two villages, a deep conviction grew within me and one in which I firmly believe: years of work among them are of no use if we don't change their environmental situation, by giving them a space where they can live more humanely....

As a follow-up to the August 1986 Seminar, the Baradal community met again in Jessore during March 1987,[77] self-awareness, dignity and self-reliance being the main focus.[78]

Soon after February 1987, when 137 people from Alamtalla were relocated in Paikgaccha, Fr. Germano was planning the construction of another embankment in Baradal,[79] fearing that otherwise more people would leave the village for the city of Khulna. Meanwhile, the people of a new village, Chachai, who had "repeatedly expressed their desire for a Catholic Catechist to re-establish their connection with the Catholic Church",[80] received a visit from Fr. Germano, accompanied by the catechist Mati and four Baradal *Matabbars*.[81] This was arranged by the missionary, in view of the "many links they have with Baradal", which had remained a point of reference for many other Rishi villages of the area.

The significance of the 'Baradal conversion to Christianity' had been very clear to the Jesuits who first visited the area in September 1921 and later in January 1926. It was only in 1937, however, that the Rishi of Baradal sent a delegation to Calcutta inviting the Missionaries to return. In fact, on May 25th, at 4,30 p.m. Fr. Dontaine and the catechist Simon Panja, reached Baradal: "...The Muchis

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76 Germano, Letter to the Bishop, 14-8-1986, *BPA*.

77 The 50 participants of the Seminar (9-14 March) -32 males and 18 females- visualised their pastoral priorities by choosing the image of the Risen Christ whose head represented their commitment to the careful imparting of 'Religious Wisdom' (*Dharma gan*). Christ's open hands were a sign, especially for leaders and Catechists, of their attitude of 'Service' (*Seba kaj*) towards the community, thus implying the removal of a '*bicar* (trial) mentality'. The word *Marjada* (dignity), written across Christ's chest, suggested the striving of the community towards an awareness of self-identity and dignity, by asking dignity of others who did not recognise it and by giving this dignity to one another; and finally, the feet of Christ urged the community to work towards self-reliance, even from an economic point of view (cf. 'Baradal Parish Pastoral Planning Programme', National Socio-Catechetical Training Centre, *Annual Report of Activities*, 1987: 2).

78 "..... They themselves recognise that as long as they depend on foreign aid they will not be able to stand on their own feet... But there are many contradictions in this, and it becomes very difficult to intervene. The co-operatives and credit unions, for instance, have become important. A positive outcome has been the women's activity which has now expanded to incorporate Hindu and Muslim women..." (Interview with Fr. Antonio Germano, Baradal 25 -2- 1989).

79 Moreover, the Jamalnagar people had submitted a project to Caritas to sponsor them in recovering some *khas* land and the same arrangements were made for the Majdkur people, who had obtained 54 *bigha* of *khas* land from the government. (Germano, Letter to the Bishop, 2-2-1987, *BPA*).

80 Germano, Letter to the Bishop, 8-4-1987, *BPA*.

81 D'Rozario, Letter to Fr. Germano, 28-4-1987, *BPA*).

gather, full of hope, and take us to a hut prepared for us....".[82] Fifty years later, the Rishi of Baradal celebrated this anniversary with a four-day feast.[83]

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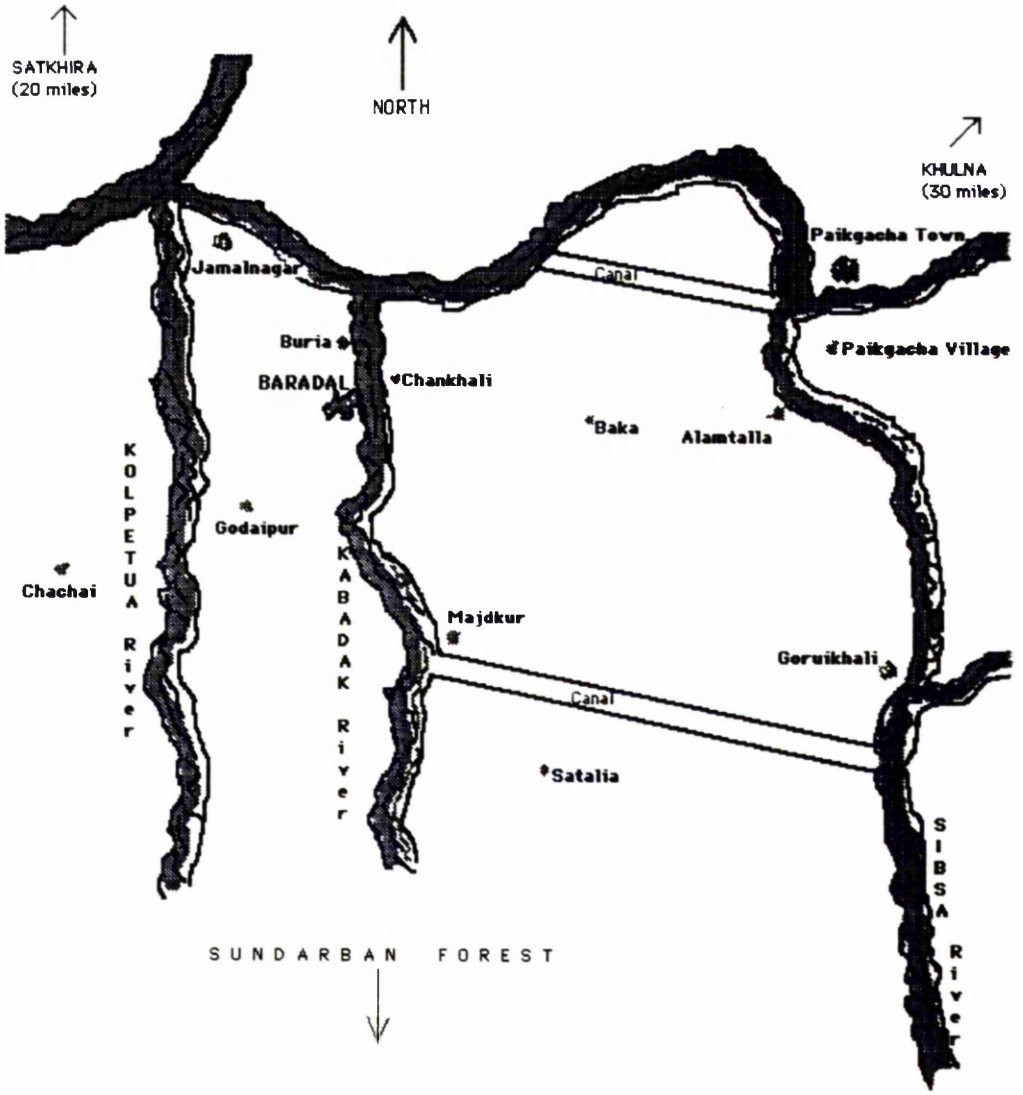

82 Cf. *SAT. 1*: Loose sheets end of Diary.

83 Civil and religious local authorities were invited and participated in the feast, and at 5.00 p.m. the people gathered for the commemoration of the historical event, which was celebrated with prayers, bible readings and sharing among the people.

Fieldwork in Baradal

I reached Baradal on January 16, 1989, by steamer from Khulna. Upon my arrival, the community was still living through the traumatic experience of the November 1988 cyclone, and the ruins of their homes, the church, the school and the Community Centre clearly needed reconstruction. While Fr. Nitti[84] maintained that "they always expect everything from the mission", Fr. Germano justified their need for help: both positions represented the eternal dilemma of the missionaries working among the Rishi: to what extent should they give help and what is needed to promote growth, responsibility and self-reliance in the people?

While in Baradal, I began reading the files of the Parish Archives, especially of the last period - 1978 onwards - in which I found a great deal of information on the recent history of this mission. This information, together with my interviews with the people, led me to a better understanding of their situation of oppression and segregation. They became Christians for this reason, as many of them recognised, and it seemed that, after centuries of oppression, they saw in Christianity an alternative way of 'salvation'.

Many of the forefathers of the Baradal Rishi came from other areas, especially from the North (Kolaroa, Chuadanga, Kamarali, Dhandia, Joynagar, Jessore, Sagdah...), and others from the South (Sahara, Sriula, Sitalpur....) either to escape famine, exploitation, and overpopulation, or during periods of flooding, or simply attracted by the skinning business. In their account of the past, they pay more attention to the evolution of events and the relationship among people than to strict chronology. Many of the Rishi North of Satkhira used to work in bamboo and cane handicrafts, others were musicians; both groups would travel around to earn a living. It was, however, during particularly difficult times that they were compelled to leave in search of better fortune. Some made a raft and they floated down the Kabadak River, till they reachedBaradal.[85] Some of the elders remembered how they were "cheated by the Zamindar" during British rule. They would receive a plot of land and

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84 By the end of 1988, Fr. Nitti, on his first assignment in Bangladesh, replaced Fr. Mandal in Baradal.

85 "... The first to come here were the Kamarali clan [Sarder] from the North of Satkhira, then the Kattrio clan came from Dhandia.... At that time there was a big market in Baradal, which was known as '*Chata* (small) Calcutta'. Goods from here were supplied to Calcutta, Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna, and many, attracted by this, came to sell mats and handicrafts. They used to build their huts after clearing forest land, since here it was all forest, or on *char* [strip of land rising from the river bed]. In the past the Rishi here were all well off....." (Interview with Basanta Mandal, Baradal, 21-1-1989).
"....I belong to the Kamarali *gusthi*, that is the Sarders.... my grandfather built a hut here by clearing the forest.... After losing their lands in Satkhira, they came here to slaughter cows, to earn a lot of money. Due to poverty they came here on foot....We had the acquaintance of many other Rishi groups... We would buy skins and bones from Satale, Kurigabne, Aksira, all in the South, and send these by boat to Calcutta.... There were three hundred Rishi families here at that time...." (Interview with Mangal Sardar, Nuton Buria, 24-1-1989).
".... My ancestors came to Baradal from Kolaroa-Chwadanga due to extreme poverty, for want of food; there they used to make baskets and *dala* (cane and bamboo handicrafts...). It was a jungle here at that time.... Cows used to die here, therefore to earn money easily we started slaughtering cows.....When people began to increase in the North, the Rishi, finding no other solution, began to settle in this jungle area, which was controlled by the Muslims... From here, they started doing business with Calcutta and Khulna..." (Interview with Sambhu Singh, Baradal, 25-1-1989).

everything produced on it - crops, vegetables, fish, etc. - belonged to them, but if they fell behind with the rent, they were beaten up and fined.[86]

During the early decades of the century, however, some Rishi had attained a good position, becoming the leaders within the group. Caste Hindus would not eat with them nor take part in their festivals, but they would visit the *Bara Neta*'s *Barabari* (homestead), the house of Sosi Mandal, the great Rishi *Matabbar* of Baradal: "... At that time, if anyone died, the body would be burnt in the Hindu graveyard, with a ceremony of fireworks and a band.... Hindus and Rishi would be burnt in the same graveyard....".[87] The Rishi elders remembered when the missionaries first approached Sosi in 1921: "The first time Fr. Dontaine went to *Barabari* (Sosi), and proposed they all became Christians, they chased him away. At that time, the Baradal Rishi were under the protection of a Hindu *sadhu*, Champlal Marwari Babu....".[88] Another minor *matabbar*, however, gave shelter to the missionary, and the latter celebrated mass on the *matabbar*'s verandah in front of the Kali temple, and assured the Rishi that one day in that very place a Church would be built and they would become Christians. Upen Mandal, Sosi's grandson, recounted, in graphic detail how twenty Rishi were arrested for robbery in his grandfather's time,[89] how Champlal Babu failed to persuade the Hindus to intercede with the police, and how they sent to Calcutta to invite Fr. Dontaine.[90]

The elders all gave a similar version of the events which brought the Christian missionaries among them and saved them from prison. The names of those missionaries - Frs. Dontaine, Mesaric, Demsar,

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86 "... When we could not raise the money for the fee, the Zamindar of this area, Taki, would send his *piyada*, i.e. armed footmen to capture us, and we had to pay a 50 Taka fine to the Zamindar and 10 Taka fine to the *piyada*. After paying this money we had to speak to the Zamindar, and asking his mercy we would say 'My Lord, I have done wrong, forgive me, I will save money and send it to you...'. Besides, the Sana clan were here to support the Zamindar. They used to collect land revenue, and oppress us in every possible way, making us do any kind of hard labour, as coolies. They would take us by force, and for doing this work, they would give us something to eat...." (Interview with Narhari, Baradal, 27-1-1989).

87 Interview with Abdul Kader, Baradal, 21-1-1989.

88 Interview with Sambhu Sing, Baradal, 25-1-1989.

89 Mangal Sarder, one of the accused at that time, stated that "...The Police started a gang-case here. They used to come here and torture us a lot, beating everyone, even the women. For this reason, many had to leave the village. Meanwhile, the Sanas collaborated with the police, in order to earn money and steal our land. We, the accused, were taken to jail. The others tried to pay our bail, but to no avail, and so they decided to call Fr. Dontaine, who had already come here once before, but at that time we did not listen to him...".

90 "....We came from the North, Kamarali, where everyone used to do bamboo work. When we heard that there were plenty of opportunities to earn money easily (*bhasa paisa*) by flaying cows, we moved here and started doing this business, which was very profitable and that is how we began to buy lands here. The first settler was Ranga Buro, and his son was Mandar.... After a while, our only job was to skin dead animals, but there were also many thieves and robbers among us, the greatest and most courageous of all being Kine.... They had been caught several times for robbery, but once Kine was accused by the Police and the Sanas, of a murder committed in a boat. The Sanas had their share of money in all this.... Once arrested, Kine implicated also many of our people, some twenty of them, who were also taken to prison.....Our leaders contacted Champalal Babu who used to look after our Rishi group. Our people asked Champalal to help them out of these troubles, and he discussed our problem at a meeting of the Hindus. The decision there was that they would not be able to intervene in this robbery case. On hearing this, our people came back from Calcutta and called a meeting: they decided to send Jamini, Pancharam, Hazra and Haripodo to Calcutta, to invite Fr. Dontaine... He came to visit us in Sosi's house, my grandfather. At that time we had a big house with 2 bigha land around, 62 bigha of paddy fields and another 42 bigha in Baradal, where Bacha Sana's house and the governmental school is. That was all ours, but all had to be sold for the court-cases...." (Interview with Upen Mandal, Baradal, 21-1-1989).

Koster - were engraved in their memories. Other missionaries had followed, and the elders were asked to recount the past history for the benefit of the younger generations. The young men were also told about past experiences of the group, when they could not sit at the local tea-shop, or at the same school as others. The first to have the opportunity to study - Radhakanto, Upen, and others - were taken to Basanti, in West Bengal, by the missionaries. Later, some went to Satkhira and eventually a school was opened at Baradal by Fr. Ceci. Of the missionaries, the greatest impression had been left by Fr. Mesaric, "a man of God, who gave us religion and a great spirituality", by Fr. Koster "who loved us like a father", and by Fr. Seraphin "who led his life so poorly that he even gave away his own allowance to the hungry". Past events were also analysed in the light of more recent ones, and the reactions of both Frs. Ceci and Seraphin, who more than once had left Baradal, never to return, were recalled in relation to Fr. Germano's threat, when the Christians continued to be stubborn in their bad habits.[91]

Despite pressure from the Bishop to re-integrate those ostracised, Fr. Germano did not take any steps, apart from maintaining an open relationship with them. Those who wished could be buried in the Christian cemetery, some had invited the missionary before dying, and others had expressed the desire to return, but the majority waited for the missionary to invite them to return. Fr. Germano, however, claimed that only if these people asked to be re-admitted, could he dictate the rules for their returning to the community, i.e. abandoning poisoning and eating carrion.

The majority of Baradal Rishi interviewed, particularly the older generation, spoke positively of the benefits of giving up skinning[92] and of their improved relations with the rest of society after 'conversion'.[93] But the lack of self-esteem persisted: "Even if coal is washed, the dirt doesn't go away!".[94] As a result, to overcome a stagnant situation many young men had moved to the cities[95]

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91 "....Fr. Germano himself proposed to come to Baradal, and he did so. But at present, he is suffering greatly because we have insulted him and many times have given him a bad name. Once our Bishop came here and he too, at a meeting with the people, insulted Fr. Germano. The latter wanted to leave, as he could not bear the insults. We pleaded to him to stay by falling at his feet in supplication. Fr. Germano broke into tears and went into the Church to pray, to 'consecrate' himself to us. Later, Fr. Osvaldo [Torresani] followed him, and he did likewise..... Just as Jesus tolerated persecution, here also, different fathers at different times, have brought us up and tolerated insults from us ...." (Interview with Mangal Sarder, Nuton Buria, 24-1-1989).

92 "... We have improved greatly in religious, social, and educational fields. Our environment is cleaner and 'dirty works' have diminished. I think that if flaying animals can be stopped completely, we'll prosper even more...." (Interview with Tarapodo Mandal, Puraton Buria, 23-1-1989).
"....The Muchi name has to be removed. If there is one single Muchi in our Christian *Para*, development will not flourish. Slaughtering dead animals and eating their meat has to be stopped. We have to learn the value of our existence leading a hard working life...." (Interview with Sambhu Sing, Baradal, 25-1-1989).

93 "... As a Christian I receive more respect than before. In the past nobody used to give us a glass of water to drink. We were not allowed to drink tea from the same cup in any shop, nor sit on a chair. In recent years, our Radhakanta has been elected Union Member, and I myself have been a Union Member. Now, by the grace of God, we can sit in a high position. Before we used to run away from the Police, but now we even have the courage to argue with them....." (Interview with Mangal Sarder, Nuton Buria, 24-1-1989).

94 Interview with Basanta Mandal, Baradal, 21-1-1989.
This feeling had also been expressed in another saying by the Goruikhali *Matabbar* at the 1987 Jessore Seminar, when, in front of everyone, he recalled a comparison that others made between the Rishi and the vulture: ".... Just like the *sakun* (vulture) which flies high in the sky, with its gaze fixed low down, where carcasses lie...". This sense of guilt

and if education had become an advantage for the Rishi, it also represented a threat for the future of that community.

Mission outstations

The ban on skinning was less successful in the outstations where the catechists in charge did not have the authority of the missionary.[96] Despite their efforts all the catechists recognised that skinning and eating carrion - and, presumably, poisoning - were still going on everywhere. In Paikgacha, for instance, matters had not improved once the Christians of Alamtalla had moved to the new place,[97] the reason given being that they had no alternative job. The same was true in Goruikhali, Chachai and Mojidkur and, although many produced handicrafts, they could not avoid carrying on the skinning trade, especially when they had difficulty selling their products. In every village, oppression by other groups, which had been the first reason for their 'conversion', was still a reality: their women were harassed, their land was under threat, and their work poorly remunerated. The continuous presence of the catechists thus became a guarantee of safety, "because outsiders have now understood that there is power behind us - the power of the mission...".[98]

The village environment - in which I also include Baradal despite a continuous missionary presence - favoured the continuity of Hindu traditions among these Christians, as, for instance, the people's strong belief in *bhut* (ghosts), and their devotion towards certain deities. It is not unusual for these Christians to refer to the experiences of trance and spirit possession where the deceased take hold of some relative to make his wishes known to them. Even more frequent is their experience of seeing *bhut*, both in human or animal form. When an animal roams a house, it is believed to be the spirit of a dead relative and is fed by the inmates; while in this last case the *bhut* is known and accepted, at other times it is feared and measures are taken to drive it away with a strip of leather, the rope used to tie goats, or turmeric. Should this be ineffective, they consult a *kabiraj* or *ojha*, to exorcise either a

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and shame among the Christian Rishi was shared also by those who had returned to Hinduism. The latter even reported a myth on the Rishi origin, to justify their position in society. The Christians too most probably knew this myth but seemed too ashamed to recount it (Cf. Appendix 2b).

95 "... Once educated our boys leave never to return" (Interview with Mangal Sarder, Baradal, 24-1-1989).

96 At a Parish Council meeting held at the end of 1986, it was revealed that slaughtering, and sometimes poisoning of cows and eating carrion was rife in every village except Baradal centre. On that occasion it was also decided that the missionary would not accept invitations to eat with those families, involved in such activities, who had been officially identified and summoned by the Parish Council (cf. Minutes, Pastoral Parish Council Meeting [in Bengali], Baradal, 29-10-1986, *BPA*).

97 ".... Before moving to this new place, we had decided to abandon 'dirty works', but we soon started up again. Our people are able to mix with others, as long as these are not aware of our sort of job. As soon as they come to know, they will hate us as before and not mix with us..." (Interview with Peter D'Rozario, Paikgacha Catechist, 26-1-1989).

98 Interview with A. Sobuj Gain, Goruikhali Catechist, 25-1-1989.

place or a possessed person. The cosmology of these Rishi Christians, so populated with many a dangerous presence, finds few equivalents in the little Christian theology that they have been able to receive. Thus, their cult of *Manasa*, among others, seems to have been preserved in a special way:[99] "... They still follow *Manasa Debi puja*; on that day they do not cook but fast, attaching great importance to the celebration...".[100] Some of the catechists tried to educate their Christians by telling them that if the snake is a god/goddess it should not harm people. As a result many stopped giving milk and banana to *Manasa*, but "old people are still unable to drop this practice". In other cases, the offering of milk and banana is directed to the Virgin Mary, who in some statues is represented with a snake, symbol of Satan, under her feet.[101] Given the strong belief in the presence of *bhut*, many Baradal Christians pay particular attention to the presence of angels, as personal custodians of everyone.[102]

Dominic Halder, a seminarian from Baradal who accompanied me while I was conducting interviews in his area, though not uncritical of the old Hindu practices of his people, also found positive meanings of this 'religiosity'. [103] Fr. Torresani, who had moved to Tala among the Hindu Rishi, reflected upon the different styles of celebration, commenting that while the *puja* represented "the eruption of joy and life", Christian liturgies were, in comparison, flat and meaningless.[104] This

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99 "....Many say that *Manasa puja* is a Hindu celebration, but then many Muslims and Christians perform it. Before becoming Christians they used to attend *puja* festivals, and even now they still attend... The Hindu mentality is still in us, and this can be seen when we consult the almanac to fix the date for a wedding. Though they do not give a *puja*, now during *Kali Puja* they offer incense in the *mandir* (temple), and while our youths like to watch a *puja*, the old are more inclined to participate in it.... *Manasa Puja* is very warmly received and carefully respected by all. ... They think that if they can satisfy the snake-goddess they'll have no danger. Many are told in dreams to give milk and banana to the snake otherwise they will be harmed, and so they follow this superstition...." (Interview with Andria, Baradal, 2-2-1989).

100 Interview with Agustin Gain, Majidkur Catechist, 25-1-1989.

101 ".... When we were Hindu we followed *Ma Kali*, and she was a mother for us, fulfilling all our desires, including religious feelings. Our people have the same mentality towards Ma Maria. She is our heavenly mother, and when something happens, we direct ourselves to her with our vows (*manat*) asking her to protect us and to fulfil our desires and expectations. Like a mother she pays attention to our needs, and that's why every evening we offer her a *duf-donu* (fragment of something) paying our respect as to a mother..." (Interview with Dominic Halder, Baradal Seminarian, March 1989).

102 "... In our catechism class we have learnt that a personal angel always accompanies us especially when we are in danger or frightened. This presence is a protection from evil spirits and every evening our people pray to the angels for help..." (Ibid.).

103 ".... For many years we have continued as Hindus, although we have been Christians in name, having received Baptism. We have followed different kinds of Hindu feast, such as *Charak Puja*, which is usually celebrated during *Chaitra* month, the last month of the Bengali calendar. This *puja* is celebrated as a thanksgiving and to purify our minds at the start of a new year. Even now our people have a great devotion to *Manasa*, and on the day of her *puja* they fast and offer milk and banana to *Kal Nagin*, a great snake representing protection from evil spirits. .... *Narayan-Sinny* is a food prepared by the people themselves, but it is believed by the people to have come from heaven. In the past, people used to exchange this food and distribute it among all to express their mutual love since the food had been received from *Bhagavan* (God).... When a *Sannyasi* came to our home, we used to believe that he came with a purpose, since it was *Bhagavan* who sent him to us, to show through him his loving kindness to us.... In astrology too our people used to see, and some still do, a reflection of the presence and the will of God...." (Ibid.).

104 ".... The celebration of a *puja* would appear to us as a most superficial religious action, since the Brahmin does everything and the people do not understand what is going on. For them, however, this is an occasion of being together and celebrating a feast.... The *puja* represents the eruption of joy and life. It could be because they have to spend a lot to organise it, but when they do the fulfilment is complete. They forget everything and live the present moment with the greatest intensity .... There is also the idea of prestige behind it, since the organiser is showing off his financial power in front of others, but for the people the sense of joy and of community is paramount. In this sense, we Christians are

had always been perceived as a problem by the missionary, but the Christian Rishi themselves enlivened Christian rites by following in addition their traditional customs.

Being a Christian in Baradal

The celebration of Baptism is important for the Rishi Christians, but less as a sacrament than a way of affiliating themselves to a group, a community, and very often an institution, which, for the time being, guarantees for them a certain social and economic security, educational facilities, and protection from the oppression of other groups. All these purchases, together with the desire to acquire human dignity, are crucial for these Rishi, who, through baptism, pass from being Ex-Untouchables, separated from men and God, to becoming 'children of God', belonging to a community of faithful. Of course, the sacrament as a sign of God's grace is supposed to produce the results hoped for, whereby man also plays an active part ('*ex opere operantis*'), and here lies the whole struggle between the missionary and the Rishi - a struggle to make the latter aware of their responsibility as Christians.

> ... It is clear that their view of Christian faith is overshadowed by many elements of the Hindu world. I think that Christian faith has not yet become for them an experience of life... I still do not know for how many of them the Christian experience has meant a vital experience. I believe they are still at a superficial cognitive level... I feel that somewhere a spring has still to be released and when it is, it will signify the start of their path of religious faith. Maybe this has already begun and we [missionaries/priests] are too superficial to recognise it. They have within themselves a very strong sensitivity. We say that they have a very low self-image and self-esteem, but deep down they urge us to treat them as human beings... This is also part of a purification of the religious reality, and I believe they have an intuition for something different within the Christian message, although this *kerigma* (announcement) has not yet become a 'vital event' for them... Walking together, they and us, we can try to discover the novelty of God...[105]

Fr. Germano seemed to be fully aware that Christian consciousness for the Baradal Rishi would require a lengthy and painful process of adaptation.

Fr. Nitti, who had been in Baradal for just over a year when I visited the community, was very critical both towards the way the community was managed and towards the people themselves. According to him, the Rishi Christians were very lazy, and they expected too much from the missionary, whom they saw as a father-figure who would take care of them in all aspects of life, especially economic matters. Furthermore, they were not attracted, generally speaking, by a desire to receive religious or spiritual enlightenment, and would go to church only to please the missionary, to

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too liturgical, we have reduced our celebration to a routine action in which life, joy and participation are absent. Our liturgies are dead: we replaced the Brahmin, but our celebrations lack the vitality of the Hindu *puja*... For this reason our Christians privilege the *Sabha Prartana*, where they can express their religiosity as a group. One who wants to pray, according to them, invites others to his/her house to pray together, while we recite our breviary alone. What we relegate to the individual, they do only in a group, as a community...." (Interview with Fr. Osvaldo Torresani, Boyra, 19-6-1989).

105 Interview with Fr. Antonio Germano, Baradal 25 -2- 1989.

receive material help from him. God was named only in terms of being feared, or within the realms of creation, but not as an experience of daily life, and "salvation" was understood in terms of survival, thus vitiating communication with the missionary.[106]

Fr. Nitti did not share Fr. Germano's views on running the Parish, maintaining that religion had been neglected in favour of social welfare. As a priest, he felt he should concentrate on trying to communicate through liturgy, celebration and life together "the salvific moments of history".[107] Furthermore, the primary place given by Fr. Germano to eliminating the poisoning and eating of carrion, was considered as a secondary problem by Fr. Nitti, who put greater emphasis on the communication of a religious awareness to the Rishi Christians. The very experience of Exodus, which had inspired Fr. Germano's activity, became meaningless in Fr. Nitti's eyes until and unless a local priest, possibly one of them, would make the effort to translate this experience in local terms.[108] The solution put forward by Fr. Nitti, which was shared by other missionaries who found themselves experiencing the same difficult situation, was to privilege the formation of a small group of Christian Rishi, who could eventually, in future, "be a seed in the whole mass, from where a local *guru* can come".

Whilst Fr. Torresani did not share Fr. Nitti's views on certain issues, such as poisoning and eating carrion, against which both he and Fr. Germano had fought together, he did share the view that the Rishi Christians were far too dependent on the mission. Even the Muslims found them 'over-nourished and over-protected'. Having spent some time with the Hindu Rishi of Tala, Fr. Torresani reflected upon the differences between this northern group and the southern Rishi of Baradal. While the former were more entrepreneurial and had changed their caste trade, thus gaining the respect of society around them, the latter were not prepared to work as farmers; at the most, they were ready to take up handicrafts or to work in the mission, and they were, in general, satisfied to work for survival.[109]

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106 "... For them there is no space for a God who might be in communion with them, bringing them salvation, since survival for them is more important than anything else. They are so fearful that their attitude is not that of the poor who puts his trust in God, but rather that of the wretched unable to struggle to change his situation. ... Their communication with us is falsified by the fact that they do not trust us, but they do everything to find our weak point and they tell us what we want to hear...." (Interview with Fr. Gianvito Nitti, Boyra, 17-5-1989).

107 ".... I am convinced that the *shekinah*, the Tent of God, is planted in their midst, within their poverty and misery. I am fully convinced that they will be saved, even before me, but the problem is not that of salvation .... but that of giving them a platform on which to establish their self-esteem, and this can come only when we are able to communicate to them the need for God..." (Ibid.).

108 ".... I can never become a *guru* for them, because in so far as I present myself in a different way from that which they know, they will refuse me. They value me for what I can give them in terms of material help... Only when one of them becomes their *guru*, can the Exodus then really start...." (Ibid.).

109 This makes one wonder whether the Rishi who moved to the southern area of Baradal were not already the weaker section of those residing in the North, and, having no land or having lost it, found it easier to accept their position as skinners, which eventually proved, for many of them, very profitable. This is also confirmed by the fact that poisoning of cows occurs much less in the northern region, where closer checks are in operation, and those who carry on business in skin in the North have many contacts with the Rishi in the South.

This, however, was the result of both a certain fatalism and the continuous experience of oppression endured by these Rishi.[110]

Fr. Torresani, in a most particular way, felt the ambiguity of missionary presence among the Rishi. On the one hand, he valued the positive involvement of the Xaverians with this oppressed group of people and, on the other, he showed perplexity in the face of the results, namely "the creation of a caste, the Christian Rishi, within a caste". Moreover, his empathy with the Rishi helped him to understand, if not to approve, the way in which the Rishi, as an oppressed minority, took hold of the missionaries. The latter, in their turn, by staying with the Rishi, had been changed: "We are like doctors, working with people affected with a chronic disease, who risk contracting the same illness; you throw yourself at them and they pass on to you both their qualities and defects...".[111]

Despite all the internal contradictions of the Rishi, their mutual envy, their psychological fragility, their passivity in accepting the oppression of others and the isolated action of those who freed themselves by escaping from the group, Fr. Torresani noted with amazement the Rishis' "feeling as a people".

> .... You may recognise that they have within themselves a strength as a group which unites them beyond the division between Hindus and Christians, and when you ask for an explanation they give only one reason: *rakter than* (the strength of blood). This goes far beyond poisoning and eating carrion together, and implies a deeper feeling as a people.....

This feeling is better expressed by my fieldwork companion Dominic Halder: he bore witness to the attitude of many Rishi elders who were "proud of being Muchi and sons of Muchi".

> ... Very few among us have a strong idea of Christianity, and they grasp with difficulty its meaning, but they understand it with their hearts. This I realised even more while interviewing them, and despite many of them being illiterate and uneducated, they have a great devotion towards God... In our experience as oppressed people we feel God as father and benefactor, because through the work of the missionaries he has protected us, and little by little we are trying to become aware of our dignity.... When I was ten I used to go outside our Christian *para* to attend class 6 at a Muslim school. Even at that young age I felt oppressed in a Muslim environment by the attitude towards me and my group. My language, my work and my behaviour were considered to be those of a 'lower man'. My parents did not teach me how to deal with the outside world: the others laughed at me when I spoke and they sat far from me, since we were *Asprsya* (Untouchables). In these and other ways, the others used to suppress us. Nowadays, however, we are very proud of our group, and we consider ourselves much more intelligent than the Muslims: this is evident from the better results we get sitting at the same bench in the same school. In the past, we could not go alone among the Muslims because the Muslim kids used to beat us up for no reason. They knew our weakness was that we belonged to a lower group. In the same way, the adults of our group in the past used to consult the Muslims every time there was a problem among us, but now we have understood that their advice is nothing exceptional and that we can do better

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110 ".... At Baradal we had a difficult time when the Rishi started to raise their head, to become a little more independent, to have a permanent job at the bazaar, to send their children to school. The more we sided with the Rishi, the more the others challenged us.... We had to be very careful not to do everything ourselves, running thus the risk of favouring the Rishis' passivity. We have to stay there with them, in their midst, but without forgetting the oppressor. For many years we have worked with the Rishi alone forgetting the others, and, in my opinion, the Rishi will not be saved in isolation, but with the Muslims who oppress them...." (Interview with Fr. Osvaldo Torresani, Boyra, 19-6-1989).

111 ".... Many times our work has meant having to sink into the mud with them, having no dry spot on the river bank on which to cling. We enter with our help and generosity, but we lack contact with the rest of society into which to insert our people.... Our Christians do not feel Bangladeshi and our structure alienates them even more...." (Ibid.)

> ourselves. Among other things, their friendly advice was a trick to cause divisions within our community, and many of us lost land because of unscrupulous Muslim money-lenders. The Muslims now know that there is power behind the Christians and, unwillingly, they have to accept this.... Our educational standards have improved considerably, so that we can face the outside world without fear and speak in proper Bengali with others. Of course, we have our own dialect, that in the past we used to defend ourselves. Although few people nowadays use our *Tare* language, we are very proud of it, and if we don't use it in front of others it is only because it reminds us of our past, when we were called 'Muchi' .....[112]

The Eucharist (Mass) is another important ritual celebrated by the Christian community and, since the Rishi joined Christianity, the liturgy of this sacrament has undergone great changes. In addition to the theological significance of the sacrament, it has been difficult for them to understand the implications behind these changes which were intended to make the liturgy more accessible to the people, through the use, for instance, of the vernacular instead of Latin.[113] Meanwhile, the missionaries, who feel the urgency to adapt Christian liturgy to local conditions are waiting for the local bishops and clergy to come out of their 'liturgical lethargy'. This problem, by no means confined to the Christian Rishi of Baradal, affects their way of 'being Christians' and of celebrating the Eucharist as a community of the faithful. Since the men work mainly on Sundays, the community celebrates the 'day of obligation' on Fridays,[114] but despite this, Christian awareness of the celebration of the Mass and of communion seems full of ambiguities.[115]

The word *prasad*, generally used to translate 'Communion' in Bengali, is the word used in Hindu terminology to refer to the food offered to the deity and later shared by the community. The Rishi, as Untouchables, were not permitted to receive *prasad* with the other Hindus, and Christian Holy Communion is most probably associated with their former idea of *prasad*. In this respect, their social situation has not greatly improved, since, at a local level, they celebrate mass only among themselves. Some of the Baradal Christian Rishi have, however, experienced a breakdown of religious barriers

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112 Interview with Dominic Halder, Baradal Seminarian, March 1989.

113 This process had matured within western Christianity, which had many centuries to assimilate a given liturgy. The Rishi Christians, like other groups, had neither the time nor the required background to absorb the foreign, Roman Latin ritual. Furthermore, after Rome had pronounced its final word against local innovations in the 'proper rituals', as happened in the controversial case of the 'Chinese Rites', missionaries had become extremely cautious in making changes in this sphere. As a result, when Vatican II promoted the implementation of local liturgies, there was an explosion of innovations, often made without any plan in mind. This occurred despite the formation of a central liturgical body in Rome and the creation of national and diocesan liturgical commissions at local levels. It seems at present, that much 'abuse' in this matter has been eliminated and that Rome has tried, once again, to re-conduct local initiatives within a more unified framework. The result of this is, of course, that creativity, which is an essential element of popular religiosity, must find its expression in other rituals and manifestations, different from the official ones.

114 As early as 1964, the Fathers in charge of Baradal, Frs. Spagnolo and Ceci, eager for their Christians to participate in Sunday Mass, had asked permission from the Holy See to celebrate the Day of obligation on Fridays instead of Sundays, since on that day many of the men worked at the local bazaar as coolies. Permission was, at a later date, eventually granted and the Baradal Christians still keep up this tradition.

115 "... Among our people, only a few understand the real importance of Mass, and they regularly attend. The rest show no interest at all. Furthermore, some attend because they are afraid that otherwise they will not receive help from the mission... From the catechism we have learnt the meaning of Holy Communion, where God becomes flesh through the *ruti* (bread), that is given to us. This is like *Amrita-Prasad* [Lit. 'Imperishable offering', which translates 'Communion' in Bengali]. ... Of course, many among our people have no interest in taking Communion, and if they do, they are motivated only by the fact that it is something free of charge! I think, however, that with time our people will understand its meaning..." (Interview with Dominic Halder, Baradal Seminarian, March 1989).

when participating at general diocesan meetings, and came to understand that their 'new religion' might make a difference. The most convincing difference was seen when some of the group were ordained priests and called to celebrate Mass for an undivided community, just like the foreign missionaries or the other Bangladeshi priests. Dominic's maternal grandfather expressed the feelings of many old Rishi when he spoke of his own grandson and of Fr. Mario Mistri, the first Baradal Rishi to be ordained priest:

> .... My daughter's son, Dominic Halder, is studying in the seminary to become a Priest, and we hope that he will succeed... Brother Mario Mistri is going to become a Priest very soon. He belongs to our group and he is the glory of the Rishi group. We will rejoice when the day comes, because he is going to wipe away our bad name. He will celebrate the glory of God in our midst, and our own glory, at the same time....[116]

Missionary understanding of the Rishi Christians

While in Baradal, I participated in an area meeting of the Xaverians[117] and on that occasion I was asked to present an outline of my research and the results of my fieldwork to date. The discussion that followed centred on various points, all of which can be reduced to a single theme: the missionary understanding of the Rishi Christians, and the ambiguity of missionary presence among them.

For Fr. Germano the central issue was the self-image of the Rishi and the image ascribed to them by others. This was clearly seen in the attitude adopted by the Rishi Christians, who, as non-persons for others, could not themselves become propagators of the Christian message: their testimony was not, in other words, credible. Consequently, the missionaries, associating with the Rishi, themselves lost credibility.[118] An indirect confirmation of the other-ascribed Rishi image can be found in a current episode in Baradal. The Jele, a local Hindu caste, had been celebrating a *puja* to purify a house on which a *sakun* (vulture) had rested. The polluting presence of this animal, which, as we have seen, was associated with the Rishi, required a five-day *puja* with the presence of five Brahmins and an expense of ten thousand Taka. The episode did not pass unnoticed either by the missionaries or the Christians, though nobody commented on it openly.

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116 Interview with Surendranath Aluis Gain, Boyra, 24-7-1989. Fr. Mario Mistri was ordained priest on May 25th, 1990, on the 53rd anniversary of the missionaries' arrival to Baradal, and Dominic Halder will shortly be completing his preparation for ordination to the priesthood.

117 These area meetings, comprising the missionaries residing at Baradal, Satkhira, Chuknagar, Tala and Bagachara, were held bi-monthly, to discuss matters of particular pastoral and community interest. Participants to the meeting held on January 17, 1989, were Frs. Germano and Nitti for Baradal, Frs. Flores and Albor for Tala-Chuknagar, Frs. Caldognetto and Gobbi for Satkhira and Fr. Spiga for Bagachara. The Regional Superior, Fr. Rigali, was also present.

118 The Muslims of Goruikhali, who did not want to acknowledge the Rishis' advancement, called the missionary '*Muchider Father*' (the Father of the Muchi), at once invalidating, within society at large, both the activities of the Father as well as the Rishis' aspirations for human dignity.

Fr. Caldognetto on this occasion reported the episode of some Hindu Rishi oppressed by the Muslims who wanted to become Christians because only in this way could they oppose their competitors ('*callanj karba*') and with this intention, they approached the missionary. When he asked them about the relation between their plea and *dharma*, they answered : "Isn't *dharma* about saving one's life?". In this the Church seemed to promise 'salvation and dignity' only to those who belonged to its fold. In this sense, Christianity had offered nothing different from Islam or Hinduism, where *dharma* became part of the power structure of society. Hence the Christians were asking to belong to a structure which protected them, just as other structures protected others. The Christians' experience of *dharma* was deeply rooted in this view of self-preservation, where religion is used by those who want to increase their power, by offering protection to certain groups and in exchange seeking their loyalty.[119] Apparently, opposition to a Church structure open only to the converted, did not solve the problem either. The important issue was, in Fr. Rigali's view, to be able to animate this 'structure' from inside and to provoke a change of attitude within the official Church.

Looking at the Rishi Christian communities from a historical perspective, Fr. Flores pointed out that the missionaries recognised the failings of the Rishi, but had been unable to grasp their positive qualities. It could not be denied, for instance, that the Rishi had their own understanding of '*dharma*', and if this was the case, the missionaries were called to answer to their religious expectations in religious terms. It remained important, however, to find the most suitable way of formulating these answers. Fr. Albor understood his presence among them, not in terms of answering questions, but more in terms of listening to their questions and, along these lines, he made himself available in order to help them become conscious of the *dharma* they already possessed: "Maybe they do not need *dharma* from us, but just to feel part of *dharma* and to discover this *dharma* within themselves, since they seem to be excluded from it...". On this point, some maintained that "no one would be able to give freedom to the Rishi, unless and until some of them had personally paid for it, even to the extent of risking their own lives".[120] Fr. Gobbi, however, knew that for his Satkhira Christians this was "great, but just too great for them!". There was no disputing that the Rishis' *dharma* was both a search for protection and for dignity, but the 'new religiosity' proposed to the Rishi, the message of Christ, was a patrimony neither of the missionary, nor of the Rishi.[121]

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119 "... This *dharma* as practised by men cannot encompass the universality of God's paternity... We presented a Paternity of God which benefited only our Christians, and so they seek protection from the Christian God, and jump on the Church's band-wagon. If the Church does not place itself in a proselytization perspective but as 'the seed which dies', it can become ferment .... All our efforts, however, tend to create a greater Church, to enlarge it, to establish it.... If someone comes to me asking to protect his dignity, I would give it without asking him to listen to me, to come to mass, to believe in what I have to say..... Christ protected people without asking them what religion they belonged to and without urging them to increase his group of believers....." (Fr. Rigali, Baradal Meeting 17-1-1989).

120 Fr. Spiga, Baradal Meeting 17-1-1989).

121 ".... Both, we and the Christian Rishi, are called to be faithful to Christ's message, and I see many problems being solved in our continuous conversion to it. I do not find myself in need of going to the non-Christians because our Christians do not perceive the message..... By working for a group of local Christians, I am at the same time working for the Bangladeshis, because my efforts go towards helping this group of poor devils who are trying to 'become men'.

Despite the missionaries' reaction to my challenge that a certain dualism between religion and uplift existed in their ideology, they failed to convince me of the contrary, and if dualism was not the characteristic of individual missionaries, it turned out to be that of their group as such. On this score, the Christian Rishi seemed to have reached a better understanding of themselves and of their situation. Andria, who became a Baradal *matabbar* in 1987, exemplifies the expectations of the Rishi and their demands as a group:

> ... Our greatest needs are education and money. We expect, in particular, religious education, but along with this we expect money, because our economic condition is so very poor. It is easy to observe that poor, weak and helpless, we are the ones who have become Christians. Others who were in trouble, came running to join us as Christians [during the seventies, at the time of relief aid]. As a result, they have developed this mentality of becoming Christians in order to receive substantial monetary help. But we want spiritual education as well, so that we can live in society as true Christians. We have to give up this mentality of only expecting things, and build up an attitude of giving. We have not yet been able to attain a disposition of sacrifice and self-offering, but we are crippled by our economic situation, and unless we become solvent, we will never improve on the spiritual side either. Religious awareness does not fill a space in empty stomachs and empty minds.... If we can solve this, our spirituality will improve...[122]

This is my faithfulness to Christ's message, which is asked of me first and foremost... When I see that people in some way 'convert' themselves, not necessarily to Christianity, I am thrilled ..." (Fr. Gobbi, Baradal Meeting 17-1-1989).

122 Interview with Andria, Baradal, 2-2-1989.

The Chuknagar and Tala-Khanpur experience

It is significant that the first Xaverians to reside among the Rishi outside the parish structure were those who had first worked among them in the parish. This was the case with Fr. Fagan, who in 1979 left Simulia parish to live for a year among the Rishi of Kanarali village, South of Jessore, producing at the end a report on their untouchability. At the beginning of 1980, a singular, new experiment was started by Frs. Paggi and Lupi among the non-Christians of Chuknagar. Though Fr. Paggi had spent several years in Satkhira parish, Fr. Lupi had only recently come to Bangladesh and both agreed to dedicate their time and energy to living with the poor. Chuknagar had been contacted in the past,[1] but this fresh attempt, sixteen years later, represented something different; whilst initially the two missionaries thought of focusing their attention on the Rishi, they soon realised that the nearby Muslims were no less poor and needy. They decided to place their hut on rented land between the two *para* so as to serve both groups.[2]

For the Rishi, however, the most striking novelty was that the two missionaries had no intention of converting them, at least not at that early stage. Indeed, missionary activity was confined to *koinonía* and *diakonía* (sharing and serving), leaving the *kerigma*, or Gospel preaching, for later times. Their first and main activity was the school for Rishi and Muslim children unable to attend government schools, which gave them the opportunity to follow a programme of study and later be integrated. Results were good and other Rishi in the area were eager to join the programme. Adult education was more difficult to organise, but interest was generated instead by way of a credit union soon numbering forty members from among the Rishi and Muslim poor. This initiative, however, was not welcomed by the local Muslim *Mahajon* (money-lenders), who threatened the other Muslims with ostracism for associating with the Rishi '*nicu jati*' (low caste). In the evenings the missionaries carried out a literacy programme for men and various meetings. Their house was open to all, and they soon came to realise that privacy was a western concept.

Reporting to their community after one year, the two missionaries concluded that "our effort of *koinonia* and *diakonia* with the Rishi and non-Rishi poor, though limited, seems worthy of being considered work of evangelization".[3] Some in the Assembly expressed concern for the lack of a 'religious basis' to such a presence, showing their opposition to a non-conversion oriented approach.[4] By the end of 1981, the two missionaries presented a more extensive report, reminding the assembly

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1 Back in 1963, Fr. Bizzeschi was in charge of the Rishi communities of Bagerhat and Chuknagar. One year later, however, he retired from the latter place, due to the great demands put on him by the 'Christians' there.

2 Paggi- Lupi, '*Report sulla Attivitá a Chuknagar*', Oct. 1980, *XAK*, File 11-12.

3 Paggi-Lupi, '*Report sulla Attivitá a Chuknagar*', (presented at the Annual Assembly 27-1-1981), *XAK*, File 11-12.

4 *Assemblea Annuale 1981*, Khulna 27-1-1981, Minutes, *XAK*, File 11-12.

that their experience was part of a common effort to revive missionary activity,[5] and they referred to previous documents in support of this.[6]

During 1980-81, Fr. Lupi conducted an extensive survey of Rishi presence in Khulna and Satkhira Districts (see Table 2). This showed that the Kabadak River seemed to form a natural boundary between the Rishi residing to the West and to the East. The latter (Chuknagar-Tala-Dumuria) who called themselves *Bara Beghi*, were in a better economic situation, working as farmers (many on their own land), and their settlements were more numerous and better tended. It was also noticed that these Rishi had been, and were still trying to overcome their oppression and segregation;[7] the Chuknagar Rishi had banned carrion meat from their diet and prohibited skinning dead animals in the *para*.[8] As part of this process they turned to Christianity, approaching both the Catholic and Protestant missionaries.[9]

To discourage conversion,[10] the missionaries emphasised their temporary presence in Chuknagar (even though by 1989 land had been bought and building constructions were on the increase). Besides, Fr. Lupi had moved by the end of 1981 to another Hindu Rishi area, eight miles from Chuknagar, in Tala-Kanpur. His proposed style of presence there, living not alone but in a community with local Hindu and Christian Rishi[11] caused mixed feelings among missionaries.[12]

The Tala-Khanpur Community

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5 Paggi - Lupi '*Chuknagar '81*', 10 Nov. 1981, *XAK*, File 11-12.

6 " Missionary specificity, missionary charisma, pluralism of our ways of presence, solidarity with our poorer brothers, the imperative of a liberating message, are but a few of the themes that continually recur in the General and Regional Chapters' documents and in the letters of the General Direction; our experience in Chuknagar is also the result of all this" (Ibid.).

7 1) They highly valued education; 2) they adopted a stricter diet, in the hope to be incorporated within the Hindu *samaj*; 3) Some Rishi, eager to enter into a new social network, had become Christians (Baptist Church or the 'New Life Centre' - Sweden Mission).

8 " The Muslims, who have always despised the Rishi for this habit, have not readily accepted this desire for improvement ; on the contrary, they have taken a negative attitude inciting some Rishi to continue eating carrion, by telling them that it was not enough to simply renounce this for them to be granted respect and total acceptance from the rest of society...." (Ibid.).

9 "... The movement towards Christianity ... is growing stronger: there are many Rishi *para* which continually invite either us or the Protestants, in the hope of finding a solution to the 'Rishi problem'..." (Ibid.).
The discussions between the Rishi of Chuknagar who wanted to become Catholics and Fr. Paggi were still going on in 1989 when I visited the community. It was clear that the Rishis' intention was to ensure that the foreign missionaries would take care of them. They were less enthusiastic at the prospect of having a Bangladeshi priest, since he would make it difficult to favour the "élite mentality", present in them even before 'conversion'.

10 " From all the discussions, we have the impression that they are atheists, materialistic and totally indifferent. This insistence on wanting to become Christians is spurred by the conviction that, once Christians, they will be free to make demands on us ..." (Paggi - Lupi '*Chuknagar '81*', 10 Nov. 1981, *XAK*, File 11-12).

11 He was joined by a young Christian couple from Satkhira, Francesca and Gabriel, and by two young Hindu men, Samiran from Chachai and Tapan from Kanpur.

12 " When we speak of 'new ways', we very often, and almost unconsciously mean ideal solutions and materialised utopia ... the only novelty in these 'new ways' is this hopeful expectancy of a new reality: it is believing to make possible - today - Christian utopia, despite the knowledge that the only possible utopia is the one of the Cross. One year has passed since we started our 'adventure', and still we have not given up hope...." (Lupi, '*Comunitá Tala-Kanpur - Ottobre 1981/Ottobre '82* ', *XAK*, File 12).

The Kanpur community initially presented themselves as 'Christian' (in spite of some Hindu members), thus giving new hope to the local Rishi to find a solution in Christianity.[13] They were, however, caught in a dilemma since, on the one hand, they did not wish to convert the Rishi,[14] and on the other, they aimed to present a different image of Christianity from the one practised in Rishi Catholic parishes. For this reason, after months of deliberation as to their "being Muchi" or "being Christians" they repudiated the anti-evangelical 'élite mentality' of the 'ex-Muchi' Christians.[15]

The 'Muchi/Christian' distinction touched the life of the community when one of their members, a local unable to hide his Rishi origin, was treated as a 'Muchi' like all the others in the *para*. These circumstances brought the Rishis' distress to the attention of the Kanpur community, and it was decided to support them in their struggle. Only when they themselves had been humiliated did they realise what it meant to be 'Muchi', and only then were public discussions held in an attempt to find a solution. "The decision to make ourselves known as 'Muchi', and at the same time to be people with self-respect, has been our most significant achievement this year."

Another preoccupation during this time was the comparison that the community and the Rishi themselves made between Catholics and Protestants. The Baptists in Tala over the last two years had 'converted' and baptised many Rishi families, without any religious instruction. They distinguished themselves by their open preaching, their propaganda and sale of books in the markets, and their way of dressing which was strikingly western. Concluding his report, Fr. Lupi urged other Xaverians and the Bangladeshi Church at large to adopt "the only alternative of a dialogic presence".

The Tala-Khanpur venture was an attempt to renew the image of the Catholic Church: its Christians were seeking to change from a mentality of "receiving and having" to one of "giving and being", for there were many poorer than the Christians themselves. They followed the idea of 'conversion of man to his fellow man',[16] rather than conversion from one faith to another, and for this

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13 "... The presence of a *bidesi* father would allow them exclusive rights or, at least, put them in first place with regard to receiving foreign money..... for many among them this 'giving their name' also signified their becoming Christians, thus ceasing to be 'Muchi'...." (Ibid.).

14 " All together we form a community which I like to define a 'catechumenate of life', since we have consciously decided to reside in a social network which demands maximum solidarity and sharing with the poor ... We presented ourselves to the people of the village in this way: not as Christians who came here to convert everyone to Christianity, but as a community of people who try to live and adhere to Christ's message through their own conversion...." (Ibid.).

15 "The majority of those who were once Muchi and become Christians in the Diocese of Khulna consider themselves as having moved from the status of outcastes to a 'superior' status... merely for having changed their name, but not their lifestyle ... we judged this an anti-evangelical position, against the solidarity and the closeness of the 'last ones' ...." (Ibid.).

16 "... We are not the only ones in the village to act as a ferment of change and conversion of man to fellow man; there are some 'good people' and they suffice to keep us from feeling 'superior' and to pace ourselves ..." (Ibid.)

reason, those wanting to become Christians, in the hope of solving their problems, were surprised to be received by an invitation to help others.[17]

Reflecting upon 'village politics', the Khanpur community saw themselves as part of a 'net' (see BRAC 1986), ".... a complex interaction of relationships among groups and families, little vendettas, rivalries and hidden revenge which often nullify every effort at collaboration and unity....".[18] Some, however, showed 'signs of hope'[19] and the "wisdom of the poor" indicated to the community a way from within the Rishis' own situation for they "survived peacefully" in a country where "poverty tended to degrade human dignity": in sum, it was the poor themselves, and only they, who would be in a position to change their own self-image.

The June 1983 'letter' from Tala-Khanpur shows the inter-personal relations of Fr. Lupi with his community: for the Christians, the very figure of the 'Father' had always prevented a spontaneous and sincere relationship; for others, of Hindu background, Fr. Lupi represented their *Guru*, and, as such, was always considered right and was never to be upset.

> The resonance of any element which is "foreign", be it a word, person or thing, arouses mixed feelings and behaviour in us, which even we cannot make out; on the one hand, it rings of power, wealth, happiness, prestige, ease of life, progress, potential and ..... white skin; on the other, violence, oppression, exploitation, and superiority. The Christian religion and the foreign Fathers have also had a part to play in these mixed emotions of ours, and, together with the money, progress, violence or superiority of the foreigner, there has been charity, dedication and help. So it is that Pierluigi [Fr. Lupi], a foreigner, is perceived by us within this general feeling. He asks us to look upon him and accept him as one of us, as a "friend", regardless of where he comes from. We admit that at the moment we are still not able to dissociate him completely from his "being foreign" ..... Perhaps it is only by way of this daily life, this community made up of our own people, our own culture, that we will go some way to softening this "foreign resonance", and perhaps a more friendly and sincere rapport will then be possible. Pierluigi for sure would be pleased with this. We are not that bothered .....[20]

The attempt to bring about a change of self-image among the Rishi by Fr. Lupi's personal involvement with a small community, seems close to the evangelical experience of "choosing a few" who would go forward and implement changes for the Rishi at their own pace.

This did not prevent the missionary, however, from questioning his own identity, especially in daily community life, where his identity was more other-ascribed than self-ascribed. The continuous

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17 " Certainly, we too are here in Tala-Khanpur to convert man, to change him for the better, giving him a new consciousness of himself and of others, and we are doing this through the daily 'conversion' of our own lives..... It is not of any use to change name, or to change religion if the individual does not change...."...(Tala-Khanpur Community, '*Lettera da Tala-Khanpur*', *MO*, March 1983, p. 5).

18 Tala-Khanpur Community, '*Lettera da Tala-Khanpur*', *MO*, April 1983, p. 5.

19 "The poor tire you out and sometimes they get so annoying and selfishly demanding that it is preferable to keep away from them, or to avoid them, or to send them .... to hell" (Tala-Khanpur Community, '*Lettera da Tala-Khanpur*', *MO*, May 1983, p. 4).

20 Ibid.

effort to "become one of them", to "be a friend" was, supposedly, more important for the missionary himself than for the rest of the community and, as many elder missionaries would confirm, a lifetime does not suffice to fulfil this goal. The missionary, above all, needed to accept his uneasy and ambiguous role as a 'foreigner' and await with patience the development of events. Were this to be the only result, he would at least be learning his own 'otherness' from the Other, and, at the same time, learning the "responsibility of the self".

Reflecting upon their experience of three years, the Khanpur community acknowledged the hardships to be faced in such a demanding 'poverty environment'. Their statement closely recalls Gramsci's reflection on the comparison between his prison experience and someone shipwrecked:

> ..... Whether consciously or unconsciously, he who is poor, even in terms of his own humanity, puts up resistance, shows envy, impatience, hatred: desperately seeking to save himself on his own, he becomes like someone shipwrecked, who, unable to swim, and in order to save himself at all costs, hangs on to the others to bring them down with him.....[21]

Despite the fact that this experiment had been developed over a limited period of time (1981-86)[22] and had received the support of some confrères, many, and in particular the superiors from Rome, intervened to 'modify' a 'dangerous orientation' which was started in Khanpur, where a missionary was living in community with lay people both Christian and Hindu.

Further developments in Chuknagar (and Khanpur) : 1982-88

When Fr. Lupi moved to Kanpur, Fr. Paggi continued his 'witnessing presence' in Chuknagar, despite being urged to adopt a decisive commitment towards conversion. Meanwhile, by 1982 the Rishi were considered "a privileged focus of missionary presence and action", and a "serious programme of catechumenate" was strongly urged,[23] but no personnel was appointed to this activity. It seemed, in fact, that "the Rishi had been forgotten",[24] and only later in 1983 did Fr. Tobanelli join Fr. Paggi in Chuknagar.[25]

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21 Tala-Khanpur Community, '*Lettera da Tala-Khanpur*', *MO*, March 1984, p. 5.

22 In 1986, Fr. Lupi went to Italy on rotation and various other missionaries replaced him in Khanpur. Alternatively, the centre was cared for by the missionaries in Chuknagar.

23 The 1982 3rd Regional Chapter sustained an increment of "new ways" of presence among the Rishi and encouraged the missionaries to deepen a socio-ethnological knowledge of them.

24 "After an initial boom in this direction, it seems that now enthusiasm to embark on new ways is dwindling. The reason for this is perhaps a lack of precise objectives, of clear aims, and little interest on the part of the community as well as the prospect of a rather difficult and lonely life-style...." (Paggi, '*Vie Nuove in Crisi? Rishi Dimenticati?*', *XAK*, File 11-12).

25 " Contrary to what one may think, there are very few who offer themselves for this kind of work [among the Rishi]..." (Tedesco, 'Superior's Report to the Annual Assembly', January 1983, *XAK*, File 11-12).

By challenging the Protestants' eagerness to proselytise,[26] and disputing the accusations of rich Muslims who reminded the missionary to "stick to their job of conversion", Fr. Paggi was also resisting the conversion-oriented approach imposed on him by his confrères and diocesan authorities. This feature was to characterise the whole enterprise in Chuknagar. The missionaries needed to constantly justify to the bishop their activity as in accordance with the spirit and the latest directives of their Institute;[27] they became target of dacoits' assaults, sent by the *Badralok* (important people) who did not support educational policies for the oppressed and exploited; their success with the feeder schools aroused the jealousy of those managing the state school; their desire to expand to other Rishi communities was always postponed, the accent being on stability; their attitude contrasted greatly with that of Protestants and whilst the 'New Life Centre' (Swedish Protestant Mission) had been targeting the Rishi for conversion,[28] they organised informal talks explaining to the Rishi their non-conversion oriented presence.[29]

Despite a tendency to monopolise missionary attention, diverted by serving other poor communities,[30] the Rishi on the whole were supportive of a movement which opposed the *status quo* of local politics.[31] The feeder schools had increased to cover eight villages, with others asking for the same service given the excellent results at the Chuknagar State School, and future projects foresaw an expansion in new areas.[32] However, by 1985, following a change of Regional Superior - with Fr. Rigali replacing Fr. Tedesco - and a radical change of policy, the creation of new centres was postponed

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26 After their initial enthusiasm, however, the Protestant preachers were discouraged since "they realised that the Rishi are not as malleable as they had thought... For the Rishi, the path from Egypt towards the promised land will take not forty years but four hundred years" (Paggi, '*Vie Nuove in Crisi? Rishi Dimenticati?*', *XAK*, File 11-12).

27 Paggi - Tobanelli, 'Report on Our Presence among the Non-Christians at Chuknagar', 1984c., *XAK*, File 11-12).

28 However, "many of those already baptised are turning to Krishna and Ma Kali", since the Rishi "seem to appreciate *Bhat* (rice) more than *Bhakti*.... " (Ibid.).

29 " Lately we have been trying to explain to the people the reasons behind our presence among them. We have been telling both Muslims and Hindus that the only reason for our presence is to 'preach' some essential Christian ideas. The first one is that God is a Father for all and that all men, irrespective of groups, castes or religious affiliation, are brothers..... Our presence among them is an attempt to put into practice what we preach..." (Ibid.)

30 " Our first task has been to get closely in touch with the people with whom we live... Our house is open to everyone for the most part of the day, without discrimination on grounds of caste, sex or religion. From the outset, we wanted our house to be a sign of unity in a society where castes and religious prejudices have destroyed the human community.... " (Ibid.).

31 " Besides the support received from the poor and common people, following these acts of vandalism, we have also received sympathy and backing from the leftist group of the area who had made an enquiry into the happenings. This group has also warned the top people not to threaten us any longer" (Ibid.).

32 " From many places people have asked us to start up the same educational services. This could be extended to the outcaste Muslims .... On this matter we wrote a letter to the Bishop and his council. We think that the educational service is the best we can provide for the poor and non-Christian, and this we should do without expecting them to join the Church. This could prove that the Church is '*Sacramentum Salutis*' among mankind. ....." (Ibid.).

indefinitely.[33] In fact by 1986, the Rishi 'line of activity' was no longer a priority.[34] Furthermore, the need to establish a common ground for a "Xaverian project of evangelization"[35] was taken to involve redirecting all efforts at Chuknagar and Khanpur into the parish framework. The failure to produce concrete results in terms of 'conversions', or at the very least a catechumenate programme, was beginning to trouble those who expected results.[36]

The mood of dissatisfaction became more evident when accusations were made of carrying out relief activities,[37] and the missionaries were accused of having created a 'fashion' in Chuknagar.[38] A call for a written 'joint policy' for those working among the Rishi, so as to avoid 'confusion and misunderstandings'[39] aimed at producing 'common guidelines'. This preoccupation with the need for the Xaverian community to be kept informed so that "nothing would be enacted without full prior knowledge",[40] was hardly operative in the parishes.[41] The intervention of the General Superior warning against the dependence of the "new paths" on their 'founders', implied agreement with the charges.[42] Though it had been recognised in the past that not many Xaverians were offering to work in Chuknagar, no one at this stage, apart from those directly involved, seemed to detect the irony of the situation.[43]

The non-conversion attitude of Frs. Paggi and Tobanelli, who persisted in defining their activity of eight years as a "presence of service", was largely responsible for the non-appointment of new personnel , and at the forthcoming Regional Chapter of March 1988, the communities of Bagachara,

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33 Meanwhile in 1985 Fr. Paggi published the first part of his study on the Rishi, later completed in 1990 (Paggi, L., 1985-1990. *Ricerca sui Muci-Rishi di Khulna e Satkhira - Bangladesh*, Mimeo).

34 Rigali, '*Relazione del Regionale - Assemblea Annuale*', 28-30 April 1986, *XAK*, File 11-12.

35 Minutes 'Annual Regional Assembly', 28 April 1986, *XAK*, File 11-12.

36 Minutes '*Relazione dell' Incontro Saveriano*', 4 Dec. 1986, *XAK*, File 11-12 - 'The 'New Paths': Seven Years On".

37 Minutes '*Assemblea Annuale*', 26 Feb. 1987.

38 "You at Chuknagar are just like Pierre Cardin; you have created a style, a 'charismatic fashion'. Although you have been the pioneers, it is now time for us to get our act together and create a Xaverian style....." (Cf. Minutes '*Assemblea Annuale*', 26 Feb. 1987).

39 Minutes '*Incontro delle Comunitá di Chuknagar e Khanpur*', 21-12-1987, *XAK*, File s.n.

40 Minutes '*Incontro SX*', 4-11-1987, *XAK*, File 11-12.

41 Some informed the assembly that the Bishop when opening new parishes, was appointing Xaverian personnel rather than local clergy, thus disproving their gradual 'phasing out' from the diocese (Ibid.).

42 Ferrari, G., '*Relazione conclusiva della Visita di P. Gabriele Ferrari, Superiore Generale, Alla Regione Saveriana del Bangladesh*', 24-2/20-3 1987, *XAK*, File s.n.

43 It was in these circumstances that Fr. Tobanelli was having to run the two centres of Khanpur and Chuknagar with the help of a Spanish student and, with Fr. Paggi not yet fully recovered, he presented his resignation to the Superior in July 1987.

Chuknagar-Khanpur, "being in a consolidating phase of their respective identities, services and structures", were urged to adopt an attitude open to conversions.[44]

Although Fr. Rigali admitted that "only the group interested in the work among the Rishi had the will and found the time to meet",[45] he advised the Chuknagar Xaverians on consolidation rather than expansion.[46] Following this, more personnel left Chuknagar, and in such circumstances Fr. Tobanelli left the mission. Taking a sabbatical year, he dedicated this period to a reflection upon his experience among the Rishi, and while reading for an M.A. at SOAS produced a research paper on the Rishis' Untouchability (Tobanelli 1989).

1989-92: 'Salvation through Education'

The Chuknagar-Khanpur programme for 1989 received new impetus with the presence of Frs. Flores and Albor, who joined Fr. Paggi, but it also re-affirmed an unambiguous policy of missionary service excluding all possibility of proselytisation or catechumenate, contrary to repeated demands from the religious and ecclesiastical authorities.[47] Their priorities included supervising nineteen 'coaching centres' and training twenty-one teachers.[48] Education was extended beyond the government syllabus, promoting in the pupils "a fresh awareness of their human dignity and social values" in relation to their history and culture. Other developments included adult education, service to the sick, and collaboration with the local NGOs,[49] through the 'Uttaran Club', a local organisation which had developed a programme for destitute women.[50]

Commitment to religious life motivated the community to be "at the service of this people", and though determined to involve as many confrères as possible in expanding their project, they were aware

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44 "..... the way to integrate new Xaverian personnel should be facilitated by common views in their aims, methods and structures; Christian style of life should be more openly witnessed, and the possibility of a catechumenate as a new step, where opportune, should be implemented....." ('*Gruppi di Lavoro per il Capitolo*', Introduction, 28 January 1988, *XAK*, File 11-12).

45 Ibid. The 1988 Chapter Documents contained only a brief reference to the Xaverian presence among the Rishi: "Commitment to the Rishi must be planned according to field of work, personnel and means."

46 "..... A reflection on the socio-religious and cultural reality of the Rishi group is being carried out, so as to find a better way to conduct our activity. There are also ideas of expansion, but we should first consolidate the future of the two centres ....." (Rigali, '*Relazione del Superiore Regionale al V Capitolo Regionale*', 8-3-1988, *XAK*, File s.n.).

47 Chuknagar-Khanpur Programme 1989, 10-11 January 1989, Chuknagar Centre Files.

48 Among them 16 were Hindu, 2 Muslim and 3 Christian. They were helped by 28 students.

49 The missionaries noticed that only in Tala Upozila were there at that time more than 50 local NGOs, 23 of which were legally registered. The competition and division among these NGOs, the missionaries maintained, was easily projected into the villages and the lives of the people.

50 Cf. *Uttaran*, Jatpur - Tala 'Report on the Women's Development Plan', July 1987- June 1988, Mimeo (Translation A. Casey). Fr. Paggi had been in touch with this NGO formed by young Muslim men and women, since 1984-85.

of an indifference towards their activity from the Xaverian community at large;[51] steps were taken to favour a closer relationship with other Xaverians as well as with the Bishop. At the Annual Assembly of May 1989, Fr. Rigali reported that the Chuknagar Community "has consolidated and organised both its work and its own method of intervention".

The formula "salvation through education"[52] characterised the 1990 Chuknagar programme, reaffirming that "there is no direct conversion work, latent or otherwise, implied in the project".[53] With many having achieved the Secondary School Certificate and a widespread interest in education, missionary presence had become "a kind of disturbance": influential people were not happy to see the poor acquiring a "new consciousness of their rights" nor to feel power slipping from their hands.

Given the lack of responsibility, consistency and proficiency of the teachers,[54] the missionaries decided to seek voluntary collaborators to keep the project operative on a low budget, and instil the essential education of human values. This would provide a place of encounter for the Rishi where they "would not be ashamed of their group" and the motto "Muchis for the Muchis" motivated the older students' involvement in education.

With rumours of excessive spending and accusations of engagement in 'relief activity' still continuing, and with new personnel required for 1991, the missionaries were reminded of the on-going challenge this option implied: "constancy, patience, humility, long-term planning, much effort, and suffering". Though the programme for 1991 consolidated some of the earlier anti-conversion tendencies, the missionaries did stress the Christian nature of their presence and a 'future', albeit distant possibility, of Rishi conversions. Thus their "witnessing by mere presence" seems not to be their preferred choice, but a temporary measure.[55] Nevertheless, and with no definite time for 'conversion' specified, their aims ("salvation through education") were designed to allow the Rishi a certain freedom of choice.[56]

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51 Chuknagar-Khanpur Programme 1989, 10-11 January 1989, Chuknagar Centre Files

52 This motto was coined by Fr. Paggi in a conference held in Dhaka in March 1990.

53 Xaverian Meeting, 6 Nov. 1990, Khulna, 'Chuknagar Feeder School and Tuition Programme', *XAK*, File s.n..

54 The teachers were 37 serving the 19 centres (4 primary, 15 Junior and high schools, and 9 Adult Education centres). The total number of students given for 1990 was 475.

55 "....Since their [Rishis'] situation is of such a nature that for the time being there is no possibility of directly and immediately preaching the Gospel, we try patiently, prudently and with great faith to at least bear witness to the love and kindness of Christ and thus prepare a way for the Lord, and in some way make him present. On the other hand, it is only in a large-global-Kingdom-wise view of the mission that this witness finds its genuineness and authenticity" (Albor - Flores - Nitti - Paggi, ' Chuknagar Programme 1991', *XAK*, File s.n.).

56 ".... The project is aimed at breaking down racial, social, religious and economic barriers due to the fact of being born a Bangladeshi Muchi; this project is geared: 1) towards consciousness raising and inculcating the values of reading and writing for the betterment of their situation; 2) to make public opinion aware of the injustice of their situation; 3) to help the beneficiaries acquire their basic right to education in a country of Muslim majority; 4) to contribute towards the reduction of illiteracy in Bangladesh; 5) to rehabilitate as many of these children as possible; 6) to open up the

In 1991, two visiting members of the General Direction[57] criticised the project as limited to "instruction and assistance", the missionaries' "witness of mere presence" as insufficient, and their faith as dangerously demeaned.[58] However, if faith motivates missionary presence among the Rishi, this does not necessarily imply an urge to persuade them to adopt it. This central issue was discussed in the "1992 Community Project", providing also an indirect answer to their superiors' position:

> No introductions are needed to the Chuknagar project. For many years now the Xaverians have been present here. The motivations, options, hopes and dreams remain much the same... even if the Xaverian personnel change.[59] Our presence here is a choice we make in favour of the Rishi group - a downtrodden people, victims of other groups and systems which enslave them. Education remains the main instrument with which we try to reach as many of this group as possible. We, like the Church, "encompass with (our) love all those afflicted by human misery and (we) recognise in those who are poor and suffer, the image of (our) poor and suffering founder" (Lumen Gentium n. 8).[60]

If the possibility of future conversion was evident in the 1991 programme, this seems to have disappeared altogether from the 1992 project. The 'mere witnessing', considered insufficient by the superiors, returns again as the main focus of their activity with the accent being far more on the 'witnessing' than the 'mere', contrary to their superiors' emphasis. In this way, for the missionaries in Chuknagar, the Rishi have become the 'relevant Other', the important ones, while they themselves find meaning in their faith by sharing their lives with this 'Other'. The focus has thus shifted from 'conversion <u>of</u> the Other' to 'conversion <u>to</u> the Other', and even though there may lie hidden in the hearts of these missionaries the secret desire that some day the Rishi will embrace Christianity, they show no concern, unlike their superiors, when this 'conversion' is postponed indefinitely.

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possibility of development to these social groupings giving them the chance to find alternative work; 7) to begin a movement against similar oppression, injustices within Bangladesh, where sadly 'might is right' in the daily struggle for existence...." (Ibid.).

57 These were Fr. Marini, the General Superior, and Fr. Rigali, a member of the Gen. Dir. and former Regional Superior of Bangladesh.

58 The superiors' position was summarised thus: "Your preoccupation to not misuse your service for the sake of an easy proselytism, should not make you run the opposite risk of placing our faith in brackets. The way is the truth: truth about ourselves and about the message we bring...".

59 At this point in time, Fr. Paggi is the only Xaverian who has been working in Chuknagar since 1980 to date. Of the others, Fr. Albor had joined in 1989, Fr. Nitti in 1990, while Fr. Flores returned to Mexico in 1991. From April 1992 till the end of that year, J. Devine a Scottish Xaverian joined the community.

60 'Chuknagar Community Project 1992', XAK, File s.n.

The "Rishi Research Group"

Following the proposal that a research group should co-ordinate the missionaries' activity among the Rishi,[1] Fr. Fagan was asked to promote this initiative and four meetings were held between August 1987 and October 1988. At the very first meeting the feeling was expressed that they were answering questions never posed by the Rishi themselves which conditioned the whole enterprise. The common interest in theoretical research was soon overshadowed by a variety of interpretations over the mission understood in terms of the 'Kingdom of God', which for some represented an open and dynamic reality in itself, and for others a clear proclamation of the Christian faith.[2]

The specific Rishi problem seemed to be confined to their "relationship to the cow"[3] and all the implications this entailed, which apparently could not be solved either by conversion to Christianity,[4] or by a process of education/conscientisation of the Rishi.[5] Nevertheless, the missionary role was understood as one of organisation, animation, mediation of "new categories and new values" to transform reality. It seems that, failing to propose 'conversion' to Christianity,[6] the missionaries resorted to promoting another kind of secularised 'conversion', closer to the western model of '*Homo aequalis*'. After establishing a triple division (1. Rishi Christians who had converted to Christianity, 2. Hindu Rishi who merely sought support from the missionaries and, 3. Hindu Rishi who asked both for support and 'conversion'), it was pointed out that the Rishi themselves needed a strong motivation, or a "view of faith", to start a process of self-liberation which could find expression in Christianity, Hinduism or political commitment. While the debate on Christianity as a suitable solution seemed endless [7] it was pointed out that the Hindu Rishi had every right to adopt a model of development

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1 Xaverian monthly meeting of December 1986, XAK/ File 12.

2 Fagan, Minutes '*Apostolato tra Rishi ed Ex-Rishi - I° Incontro, Boyra', 25 Agosto 1987*', Mimeo.

3 Fagan, Minutes '*Apostolato tra Rishi ed Ex-Rishi - 2° Incontro, Boyra, 12 Ottobre 1987*', Mimeo.

4 There was, for instance, a new breed of Christian Rishi who had moved from the villages to the city of Khulna and who could survive there only by working as sweepers, cleaning latrines, septic tanks, drains etc. These, being closer to the *Methor* (Sweepers), did not feel like participating in the mass and were ostracised by other Christians who thought that their job brought dishonour to the whole community (Ibid.).

5 "... What would happen to the boys and girls once they had achieved their 'Matriculation Pass'? Would the wider society recognise their effort, or were they destined to be doubly-alienated, firstly from society and secondly from their own group?..." (Ibid.).

6 " The present situation is defined by the Latin phrase '*cuius regio eius religio*'. The Rishis' perception of what the missionaries had to offer through their 'Catholic organisation' did not correspond to what the missionaries believed they were transmitting to them. The political-material aspect prevailed in the receivers' perception; in other words, the paternalistic protection of the missionary as a good father-Jamindar. If this analysis is correct, a new presentation of the message (and the role of the missionary) must be made to the Christian Rishi, in order to reach out to the religious sensitivity of this people and to stir in them a move for the better - a conversion of the heart" (Fagan, Minutes '*Apostolato tra Rishi ed Ex-Rishi - 3° Incontro, Boyra, 20 Giugno 1988*', Mimeo).

7 According to Fr. Fagan, there was a clear difference between the proclamation of the Gospel to a Hindu who was not attracted by the missionary's power, and to a poor community of people who were marginalised, oppressed and in need. The presence of freedom in the first case was replaced by "coercion, or dishonourable or unworthy pressure" in the second (cf. Paul VI, '*Evangelii Nuntiandi*' n. 80 and '*Dignitatis Humanae*' n. 4).

which would respect their religious and cultural identity,[8] without needing to 'change' religion to pursue social improvement.[9] This was based on a general theory that "people cannot live a life without meaning, in complete chaos, and a community of people must share meanings which make sense to its members and give reasons for existence.....".[10] This was true also for the Rishi, especially when they wanted to remain Hindu, and whilst the Xaverians did not pursue this line towards a 'political commitment', they did recognise that "the problem of the Rishi is essentially a problem of social justice concerning their integration in the wider society".[11]

A re-comprehension of the Rishis' Hinduism exposed missionary paternalism in its eagerness to correct and change without taking into account the Rishis' ability to survive as a group and their willingness for improvement by adopting forms of popular religiosity.[12] However, the differences between those who advocated the preeminence of Christianity and those who did not, saw the end of the Rishi Research Group. Nevertheless, the debate is still very much alive and the missionaries continue to question the best solution for the Hindu Rishi who seek their help.

The Indian debate on Untouchables' conversion

A debate parallel to ours had been taking place over these years in India on the reasons for Tribals and Untouchables to change religion and on missionary attitudes to conversion. Although the missionary often proposed conversion for one reason and the Untouchables accepted it for quite another, some missionaries have recently come to accept 'conversion' as a 'social protest', or to justify it on the grounds of sociological analysis (Pushparajan 1983a; 1983b; cf. Rajamani and Lawrence 1983: 53-60). With greater emphasis on power relations than on conversion as an individual experience, we are led to confront those cultural explanations of 'Untouchability' which underline a holistic view of Indian society, according to which Untouchables "participate willingly in what may be called their own oppression" (Moffat 1979: 303).

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8 "...Not even the need for development can be used as an excuse for imposing on others one's own way of life or one's own religious belief" (John Paul II, '*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*', n. 32).

9 "The problem here for us is instead to find in the Hindu Rishis' religion and culture those elements which can provide a perspective of faith and life that will motivate their commitment towards a self-liberation process" (Fagan, Minutes '*Apostolato tra Rishi ed Ex-Rishi - 3° Incontro, Boyra, 20 Giugno 1988*', Mimeo).

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 This was shown by Fr. Flores in a critical reading of Fr. Paggi's (1985-1990) study on the Rishi.

Though the missionaries' primary concern was not socio-economic development but the propagation of Christianity, missionary involvement in the uplift of 'Untouchables' in British India[13] materialised in a consistent way and "became at once an inspiration and a threat to the Hindu leaders" (Kananaikil 1983: 9). If we perceive history from the point of view of Untouchables, "change of religion can also be viewed as a social movement of ... the Untouchables or the tribals who were adversely affected by colonial, economic and political changes and had to adjust to the new situation"(Fernandes 1984: 292). With the weakening of the *jajmani* system and the consequent loss of material security for the Untouchables, they saw themselves as free to seek liberation elsewhere (Forrester 1977: 41-42). Christianity was perceived by them not merely as a 'religious event', but as a means of readapting to the change and as an alternative means of upward mobility and land security.

The egalitarian ideologies of the Protestants helped them to value the individual, to oppose mass conversions (cf. Oddie 1978: 30-45) and to consider the caste system as the very antithesis of equality and contrary to their Christian message but, eventually, they accepted living with caste separation in the Churches, giving priority to "saving souls" (Oddie 1969: 274-77). For the Catholic missionaries, on the other hand, caste was viewed as 'just one more case of legitimate stratification' (Fernandes 1981: 25-26). They did not attach much importance to the individual and most of them recognised the value of the caste group and attempted mass conversions from the outset. However, missionary attitude towards caste kept changing and some among both Protestants and Catholics 'did not accept caste separation without question' (Oddie 1969: 264-68; cf. Launary 1860-1896). Although seeing conversion not as the suppression of caste but as social promotion, and Christianity as a new, higher identity, many converts were not prepared to accept caste separation within the Church (Forrester 1980: 73). Nevertheless, this must be placed within the competitive atmosphere between different religious denominations or different religious orders in the Catholic Church and the use of material baits to reach their ends (Fernandes 1984: 302). Despite this, Tribal and 'Untouchable' converts reacted according to their own social, material, psychological and spiritual needs, which cannot be compartmentalised (Albones Raj 1981: 63-4). As a consequence, this question cannot be discussed in terms of purely spiritual conversion since, from the Rishis' point of view, these categories are not separable.[14]

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13 Given that "the British did not believe in untouchability", and that their laws "were based on the principle of equality of all men and hence opposed to recognising caste distinctions and caste privileges, ... [this] provided the 'Untouchables' with a symbolic world-view and a new self-image... The new laws introduced by the British..... gave them a prestigious alternative to the traditional values of the caste system and an authoritative model of public behaviour with legal claims against invidious treatment. This was the Indian context when the missionaries entered the scene" (Kananaikil 1983: 9).

14 We must also consider that, despite the 'Protective Discrimination' policy adopted by the Indian Government, many Harijans during 1981 in Tamil Nadu converted to Islam: "... The Harijans are resorting to conversion as a last resort, since all other attempts have failed...."(Augustine 1981: 54). According to this policy, only those who profess to be Hindus are eligible to belong to the Scheduled Castes and to take advantage of the benefits deriving from it. Kananaikil interprets this policy "as the concern of the dominant group to preserve its economic and political superiority...." (Kananaikil 1982: 262).

A recent debate on the political dimension of conversions in India has shown that in "the political game of numbers... the problem of Harijans is totally forgotten" since, when Harijans, in an attempt to escape oppression switch to another religion, they find they "are sadly mistaken" because "conversion by itself is no solution to the problem" (Pushparajan 1983: 33).

Not only did early missionary preference for the higher castes 'helped to perpetuate caste system in the Church in India' (Fernandes 1981), but a continuity of caste separation both on the level of theological reflection and Christian practices is still present.[15] If from a sociological point of view it is normal for the Church as an institution to be affected "by the social structures and values of society at large", Church leaders are accountable for their lack of commitment[16] in addressing a moral problem which the Church claims 'a special vocation' to solve (Kananaikil 1983: 24).[17] This comment on the Church in India is applicable also to the Bangladeshi Church: "More than what the Church can do for the country, it is imperative that the Church in India becomes a living sign of what it preaches, for it own justification to exist...."(Kananaikil 1983: 25). On this score, the struggle of the 'Dalit Christian Movement' in Pondicherry-Cuddalore Diocese[18] exposes the "indifference, insensitivity, callousness and disrespect on the part of the Church authorities towards the Dalit Catholics".[19]

If Christianity in India "has failed in solving the problem of Harijans", it is because this " is essentially a human problem ... of inequality and oppression", where religion has been used to cover up other interests (Pushparajan 1983: 36). What is needed from the missionaries and the Church is a commitment to the Kingdom of God whereby the Church, far from winning more members to her fold, favours the creation of "new relationships and new structures conducive to sharing".[20] To make this

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15 Despite a statement made in 1982 by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India disowning caste practices in the Church, Kananaikil maintains that this statement "was not even noticed by responsible people", and that "it has not led to any serious action-programme" (Kananaikil 1983: 22).

16 "...the Church, which teaches equality of all people, has not so far been seriously perturbed by the presence of caste practices in the Church, or found it necessary to initiate serious reflection on the implications of the caste in the Church, or of the caste phenomenon in the Indian society...." This 'incapacity of the Church' seems to be related, according to Kananaikil, "to those who are in authority in the Church" - administrators and bishops - who "come from certain selected regions or classes" (Ibid.).

17 To take the question of caste in the Church seriously means, for example, to set up concrete mechanisms "to study to what extent selection of candidates for priesthood and religious orders and appointments to important positions are guided by caste considerations, and to take appropriate measures to remove caste-based practices in these areas" (Ibid.: 25).

18 In support of Kananaikil's earlier point (note 16), in this Diocese there are only 15 Dalit priests out of 117, while the Dalit Catholic population is three quarters of the total. Not only were the Dalit Catholics prevented from celebrating a convention on May 1990 by both Church and State authorities, but measures were taken to discredit the Dalit Christian Movement. The convention was eventually held at Mugayur, a village near Villupuram. In the presence of nearly 4000 Dalit Catholics, 25 people addressed the convention (RAJ, A., S.J., *The Dalit Struggle for Freedom in Pondicherry Diocese*, pamphlet -mimeo n.d. [c. 1991]: 17-18).

19 Ibid.: 21.

20 "... The true Church of Christ in India today as a community committed to the Kingdom and its values, should convert herself to the poor rather than aiming to convert the poor to her fold. Conversion of the Church to the poor is the concrete sign today of her fidelity to the Gospel....." (Wilfred 1983: 68-9).

operative, it has been suggested that, prior to proposing conversions, western missionaries should oppose the 'neo-colonial economic system' of their home countries, and take into "serious account the heritage of the people and learn to respect them" (Wilfred 1983: 70).

If we apply these observations to the situation of the Rishi in Khulna, we may well conclude that the decision of some Xaverians to live among the Rishi without seeking to convert them is not totally out of place in the current climate of missionary activity. The many divisions within the Church in Bangladesh, the positions of authority occupied by the "old Christians", the Rishi Christians' constant reminder of their low origin, make it problematic for some missionaries to welcome into the Christian fold the Hindu Rishi, who are "searching for liberation", if this liberation is only partial and inconsistent. The problem of the Rishi, as that of many Indian Harijans, is predominantly a human problem which cannot be solved merely through conversion. Quite the contrary, this could in fact inhibit them from achieving a real self-liberating process. This does not prevent the missionaries and the Church in Khulna from committing themselves to the Rishi cause in the name of their faith, provided it focuses beyond the restrictive horizons of the Church. For them, as for many other missionaries committed to witnessing the values of the Kingdom, "what may appear a loss to the Church can be a gain to the Kingdom" (Wilfred 1983: 71). This said, there are still various queries which remain open and in need of clarification, many of which stem from the direct experience of the missionaries themselves, and others which point to their future activity and presence among the Rishi, given that "religious beliefs and observances cannot be adequately comprehended by setting them apart and examining them in isolation" (Caplan 1987: 251). Furthermore, despite the 'inequality' of authoritative missionary discourse and 'alternative' Rishi interpretation of Christianity, negotiation remains an open possibility (ibid.: 253-4).

Legitimacy of Conversion

The missionaries who do not endorse the Rishis' conversion to Christianity do so on several grounds. a) By adopting the views of 'radical religious pluralism', they question the 'uniqueness of Christ' as saviour. Thus, presupposing a soteriological dimension of all religions, they understand their role as "not for proclamation of Christ primarily but to live Christ's life-style..." (Kavunkal 1992: 86). b) On more practical grounds, these missionaries consider the experience of the existing Christian Rishi communities as fundamentally negative: Christianity prevents them from taking an active role in their self-liberation, it creates in them a minority-ghetto mentality precluding them from participating in the life of their country.[1] Historically, the Christian Rishi represent a minority of the group and apparently its weaker section. Though geographically divided from the rest, conversion imposed further divisions and tended to weaken their already precarious stability. Furthermore, the Hindu Rishi do not seem to be as interested in 'converting' to Christianity as in receiving help from the missionaries to forward their struggle from within their 'Hindu' milieu.

On the other hand, those missionaries who advocate 'conversion' for the Hindu Rishi could do so, apart from their different theological-missiological position, also on socio-political grounds.[2] The suspicion that the Hindu Rishi in Bangladesh will never be fully incorporated into the 'mainstream' of Hinduism, and that their struggle is not gaining any substantial ground, make these missionaries consider Christianity as a feasible alternative. Furthermore, belonging to the Hindu minority, these Rishi feel threatened by the Muslims, who are neither ready to accept them within its fold nor sympathetic, generally speaking, to their social uplift. If it is true that Untouchables in India have not substantially gained from their conversion to Christianity (cf. Deliège 1988; 1990; Wilson 1981), it is also true that this affirmation cannot be generalised.[3] Although a comparison in terms of advancement between the present Hindu and Christian Rishi is not feasible, the Christians have acquired a new form of cohesiveness and have gained much in terms of what they consider important. The presence of Rishi priests in recent years gives them a sense of achievement which has no counterpart among the Hindu Rishi. Nevertheless, the old saying comparing the relationship of the Rishi to Christianity with a snake holding a huge frog in its mouth, unable to eat it or to let it go, remains a poignant reality.

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1 "... Development works ... seem to have anaesthetised the Christian conscience regarding its social and political responsibility which is conveniently transferred to the official Church and its development agencies" (Wilfred 1984: 244).

2 "...We cannot be involved in inter-religious Dialogue without paying attention to the oppressive dehumanizing aspects of religions...." (Kavunkal 1992: 82).

3 For instance, S. Bayly's findings in relation to 'eclectic worship' of the South Indian Christians and the role played by the 'caste' headmen, find a close parallel, even though on a reduced scale, to the way Christian Rishi have adopted Christianity and the way their leaders have sought to 'adapt' to the new situation. (see Bayly 1989).

The debate on the Hindu Rishi conversion acquired new interest for a period (October 1990 - December 1993) when Fr. Germano[4] started retracing the Kolaroa villages north of Satkhira (contacted in the past by Jesuit and PIME missionaries), with the intention of proposing a different, 'un-armed' missionary presence, without the use of material means and relief aid.[5] His clarification was not enough, however, to dispel the doubts in the minds of other missionaries and local priests, including those of Rishi origin, on the 'needs and intentions of the Rishi Community'.[6] His attempt has come to an end, or at least been postponed for better times.

The two positions ('conversionists' and 'non-conversionists') still present a dilemma for the missionaries. It seems that both fail to achieve an 'objective' understanding of the problem from the Rishis' point of view, for they rest on western epistemology, resulting in a trenchant dualism - religion/welfare - which is rarely present in the Rishis' mind. If history is invoked to shed some light on the debate, it should be recalled in its totality, which means prior to the arrival of the Xaverians (even to the arrival of the missionaries themselves), and including other parallel histories which were, in a way, more successful.[7]

Mc Nee

Without acceding to MacNee's proposal of founding a Church based on ethnic roots, my view is that the 'vital concerns' of the Rishi community should become the focal priority of each evangelization process. Furthermore, the missionaries should assume a secondary role, giving place to the Christian Rishi, more qualified to transmit the faith to their own people, notwithstanding certain shortcomings. If the Christian Rishi are considered incapable of this task, it is both useless and dangerous for other Rishi to join an admitted failure. It is almost impossible to envisage a fresh start with the Kolaroa Rishi without taking into account the existing Christian Rishi and without risking the alienation of one of the two groups. If a religious discourse is proposed to the Hindu Rishi, this cannot ignore their present socio-religious experience which is rooted in their situation as 'Untouchables'. As in the case of the Tribals, so for the Rishi too, a 'focal and peripheral inculturation' cannot be neglected: this means that the post-secularization Christian liturgies and church buildings should become more meaningful to

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4 Upon his return to Bangladesh in October 1990, after a sabbatical in Italy and 12 years' presence among the Christian Rishi of Baradal, Fr. Germano expressed his desire to initiate a new activity among the Hindu Rishi.

5 Germano, '*Tentativo di Partecipare un Anno di Vita ad Asarbari di Bagachara*', 25 January 1992 (personal communication).

6 'Minutes of the Khulna Presbyterate Meeting', N° 44, Bishop's House, Khulna, 8 April, 1992, *DAK*, File s.n.

7 In my discussion of the mission history in Baradal and the relationship of Fr. Koster with the Rishi, I pointed out that this Jesuit missionary was undoubtedly influenced in his apostolate by the work conducted in Chotanagpur by Fr. Lievens and his Jesuit confrères. In this last instance, the missionaries decided to help the Mundas, the Oraons, the Kharias and other Tribals to regain their land in their court cases during 1885-92. " The inhabitants of this country ask neither gold nor silver, nor medicines, nor miracles, nor schools nor knowledge, nor learning nor wealth, nor anything else we might think of. What do these Mundas, Oraons and Kharias want then? One burden is intolerable for them: They cherish the land they till, the land cleared by their fathers. Then the Hindus came and robbed them of their land and laid landlord-service upon them. Now, help the people within the limits of the law, you will become their friend and they become Christians with sincere hearts" (Lievens to his Provincial, Torpa, Oct. 16, 1887, in Tirkey A. 1985: 126-7; cf. also, Tirkey B. 1985:152-170).

them, respecting their feelings and favouring their ways of worship. However, 'peripheral' and often superficial changes in liturgy (use of local music, vestments and signs), should be matched by a 'focal inculturation' which takes into account deeper community values.[8]

The emergence of local Churches

The search in independent countries for 'authenticity', indigenous religions and customs exposed the awkward 'foreign' aspect of Christianity. Not always, however, did independence bring greater freedom nor did authenticity offer welfare for all, and in all this the missionaries "proved to be alert to the new understanding of needs".[9]

Vatican II, putting an end to the '*ius commissionis* ',[10] handed over the mission to the local bishops and the local Churches who soon felt the need to liberate themselves from 'foreign' constraints by affirming their right to independence through the "self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating" principle.[11] Such ideas were also fashionable among some Catholic Bangladeshi Bishops, but apparently the majority could not resist the temptation to accept (for how long it is not clear) personnel and money from abroad. However, the emergence of dialogue, religious pluralism, 'foreignness' of the Church, and a new theology of religions, contributed to "a new crisis in missionary thought and, consequently, in missionary praxis", centring on the problems of 'conversion' and missionary method.[12] This provoked a reaction from the present Pope not in line with previous Vatican statements which recognise the 'humanizing elements in the missionary goals as an integral part of evangelization'.[13] "If faith," as Gomez maintains, "must come from outside, only from inside will it reach maturity". In line with this, it is only by listening to both the Hindu and the Christian Rishi that the missionaries will eventually re-discover their place and role within the Rishi community.

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8 In a series of articles, Fr. van Exem has focused his attention on inculturating Christian theology within tribal religion or 'the Sarna', this being at the basis of both Christian and non-Christian Tribals' self-identity. "A Sarna is a sacred grove of a few sal trees where at regular though infrequent intervals certain sacrifices are offered. The traditional tribal religions of Chotanagpur can thus conveniently be called by the generic name 'the Sarna' " (Van Exem 1985: 119).

9 " The zeal expended before for the salvation of souls, now was directed to development and liberation. And this deeply affected the missionary methods...." (Gomez 1989: 33).

10 According to the '*ius commissionis*' a territory was entrusted to a given missionary order.

11 The Anglican Henry Venn (1796-1873), and his contemporary Rufus Anderson were the first to develop this 'principle', giving a special place to the local Churches in evangelization (Barren 1971: 74-78).

12 "..If conversion entails a certain 'deculturation', are we justified - nay, have we any 'right' - to convert those people to Christianity? If we do not work for conversions, are missionaries any different from the functionaries of developing agencies? Agonizing questions indeed which, if answered in a certain way, would imply a 'Copernican revolution' in missionary method" (Gomez 1989: 42).

13 See *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. The increasing connection between 'Fundamentalism' and mission activity shows the two sides of this phenomenon: "Fundamentalism can be explained (rightly or wrongly) as the last ditch of a lost battle, or the spasms of a dying religiosity. However, the charismatic explosion all over Christianity can also be interpreted as a 'sign of the times' calling for a critical second look at our criticism and therefore for a reassessment of our means and goals...." (ibid.). Gomez reports on "332,000,000 charismatics in the world (including here the many Catholics), with 857,000 evangelists in mission fields" (Gomez 1989: 44).

Sanskritization and/or Conversion

If the only difference between Christianization and Sanskritization is the presence of "committed religious specialists" (Koimann 1989: 204) in the former, caste remains a common feature of both traditions. Thus, LMS missionaries imposing "a Christian way of life as practised in nineteenth century Victorian England", could not prevent their converts "from translating the social progress they made into an idiom derived from the local Hindu caste culture" (Ibid.). The affinities between Sanskritization and Christianisation[14] suggest that while some successful groups sanskritise, others "whose social improvement is less impressive ... will be more inclined to turn to Christianity" (Ibid.: 207). This was certainly the case with a large section of the Namasudras of Eastern Bengal (and some Rishi groups of Jessore) who sought "a positional re-adjustment within that basic framework [caste system]" (Bandyopadhyay 1990: 98-99), while weaker Rishi and Namasudra sections resorted to Christianity.[15]

Contrary to Koimann's conclusions, Kanjamala maintains that while Sanskritization was not a planned process and lacked dynamism, Christianization, identified by him in five different stages[16] "was a planned process with a dynamic worldview, committed religious specialists, and appropriate organizations". In this sense ".... the social status of the Christians gradually improved .... [because] the process included a gradual change through education and new work opportunities and even through political power...." (Kanjamala 1986: 29). However, both processes, according to Kanjamala, have been traditionally considered, by Hindus and Christians alike, from a narrow perspective: while Hindus maintain that a change of religion goes against *Karma* and *Dharma*, Christians defend the superiority of their religion ignoring the autonomy of each religious system.

Lately, Schwartz, inspired by Khare (1984) and by some pamphlets -'texts of resistance'- authored by Untouchable thinkers, has pointed out that a new process, clearly distinguishable from Sanskritization, is taking places among Untouchables: "By attempting historical explanations, Untouchable thinkers engage in a process by which the past is made meaningful in terms of the present, and the present is grounded in the past" (Schwartz 1989: 137). Furthermore, "origin myths and the

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14 Women, generally speaking, maintained their reproductive role and a subordinate place in family life, a position emphasised by both the Sanskritic Great Tradition and Christianity. The convergence of both traditions is revealed to an even greater degree by Koimann, when he illustrates the acquisition by Christian Untouchables of their own sacred scriptures, to replace their former Veda, and in the destruction of shrines and idols. These were replaced by the worship of one God, "an element closely associated also with the Hindu Great Tradition" (Koimann 1989: 206). Similarly to the Sanskritised Hindus, the converted Christians adopted new names, either from the scriptures or "high-sounding Sanskrit names".

15 The success obtained by the Namasudras came, apart from their numerical strength, from "the effective social mobilisation and articulation of the caste-consciousness among the members of this caste" (Bandyopadhyay 1990: 99), which motivated them to start a process of Sanskritization and political negotiation, just as Christianization served the purpose of many 'Untouchables' and Tribals in the same position.

16 These stages are: oscillation (characteristic of the first generation, whose conversion was only nominal); scrutinization (where an effort is made by the second generation to eliminate belief contrary to Christianity); combination (of the new and old traditions); replacement (of old traditions with "functionally equivalent Christian beliefs and practices"); and indigenization (whereby Hindu symbols and philosophical categories are incorporated into Christian liturgy and theology). This scheme has been borrowed from Sahay (1976).

historical explanations of Untouchable writers are structurally different, the one being myth, the other history" (ibid.).

Schwartz's suggestion to investigate "the extent to which the ordinary Untouchable can relate to notions of history and historical roots of oppression",[17] leads us to consider how some Hindu Rishi read and interpret their myths of origin as inventions of the caste Hindus, and although they are not equipped to retrace a history of Untouchability, they are very conscious of their personal and group history being man-made rather than mythical. Similarly, the historical consciousness of the Baradal Christian Rishi, their present interpretation of past events which brought them to Christianity, and the re-reading of the biblical 'Exodus' have become meaningful for their own history. It seems that in their case, the persistence of local Hindu traditions does not prevent a process of Christianization which is, at the same time, an effort to repossess culture, identity and historical consciousness.

The fact that "in the process of recreating themselves and explaining to themselves and to caste Hindus why they are who they are, Untouchables constantly face violent suppression", means that "the symbolic process always has a political dimension" or, in other words, that "Untouchable writers have sought for other sources of knowledge with which to operate within the larger discourse of power".[18] Schwartz recognises, as many missionaries do in relation to the Rishi, that "Untouchables frequently focus on immediate economic objectives", but he also acknowledges that, "while the motivation contains economic and material elements, the initial appeal is symbolic and moral rather than economic and material".[19] The Rishi of south-west Bangladesh, to my knowledge, have produced very little by way of 'texts of resistance',[20] but if we include their testimony of 'oral resistance', we can find a parallel with the situation described by Schwartz in which the oppression of the Untouchables is contextualised in time and history.[21]

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17 ".... By defining themselves and their conditions in historical rather than in mythical terms, Untouchable writers have shown a way out of the ideological box but run a large risk ..... with efforts to repossess culture and self resting largely on Western-style notions of history..... The risk remains that only small sections of Untouchable society, educated and familiar with Western categories, will be equipped to internalise these arguments...." (Schwartz 1989: 138).

18 "The potency of symbols, and therefore the power of those determining what things mean, is the ability to ensure that an agent's subjective experience becomes meaningful only when it is in tune with a world exclusive of all other worlds" (Schwartz 1989: 135).

19 ".... It is the alienation of Untouchables from the symbolic process of Indian society, the lack of ability to represent themselves in their own terms in the arena of meaning where the significance of central symbols is determined, that constitutes the real essence of their oppressed status. While the social identity of groups is to a certain extent determined by their functions, the experience of the Untouchables shows that functions may shift without a parallel shift in identity....." (Ibid.: 139).

20 Paggi (1985-1990) reports a document signed by 11 people of the 'Committee for the Social Promotion of the Rish' which seems to follow a Sanskritization process, while a second document is a letter written by three Rishi students, signed also by five representatives of the Chuknagar Rishi, to the President of the Commission for Human Rights in Bangladesh (cf. Appendix 3).

21 "These texts of resistance attempt to divest the categories and classifications embedded in classical Hindu law of their halo of eternal verity by contextualising the oppression of the Untouchables in time and history. Such texts are remarkable for their daring to question schemes of Hindu social precedence. These pamphlets show clearly that Untouchables have begun to sharpen the ideological weapons with which they will secure their freedom, for as Czsikszentmihalyi has argued, 'the battle for the value of life is fought in the arena of meaning'.."(Schwartz 1989: 139).

Concluding this discussion on the internal debate of the Xaverians working with the Rishi, I would like to return to the importance of 'dialogue' (cf. Zene 1993) not as a theory, and still less as a solution (such dialogue involves risk-taking and uncertainty), but as an open-ended and dynamic possibility differentiating itself from those clear-cut positions which do not take the Other into account. In our case, neither Sanskritization, nor Christianization, nor the struggle of political parties, seem to pay specific attention to the "meaning" the Rishi attach to the "value of life" as they experience it. Consequently - to borrow some thoughts from Gramsci's theory of consciousness - we can ask ourselves:

> What is the meaning of 'one's real nature', from which one tries to appear 'different'? First answer: 'One's real nature' can be taken to be the sum of one's animal impulses and instincts, and what one tries to appear as is the socio-cultural model of a certain historical epoch that one seeks to become. Second answer: It seems to me that 'one's real nature' is determined by the struggle to become what one wants to become (Gramsci 1985: 145, emphasis added).

If we follow Gramsci's first answer, we can say that, in so far as they are 'consumers' of the myths created by the cultural operation of the Hindu hegemonic group, the Rishi, "via subliminal operations", demonstrate "not opposition, but consent to the *status quo* "(Holub 1992:199). In other words, Gramsci maintains that 'domination' is produced "from within the system and subsystems of social relations, in the interactions, in the microstructures that inform the practices of everyday life", and that "power and domination function in so far as those dominated consent to that domination" (ibid.).

But Gramsci's second answer points in quite another direction. The 'silence' of the Rishi in their endurance of oppression does not necessarily mean consent to domination; it is rather a strategy to avoid further repression. Even the attitude of the Rishi leaders, who establish alliances with their exploiters, is not always to be taken as a betrayal of the group. The Rishi seem able to distinguish between true and false leaders, and despite the prevailing "common sense" that a leader is someone who takes advantage of the people, the Rishis' discrimination, often developed through traumatic situations, tells them what and whom to believe. To become an 'organic leader' among the Rishi, in the sense used by Gramsci, would mean to understand their struggle to become what they want to become, without focusing solely on their economic and material demands.

Other than a Conclusion

In order to arrive at some provisional conclusions, it is necessary to recall the trajectory that has brought us to this point. In the introduction I began by challenging some current tendencies in anthropology relating to the Self-Other dichotomy which foresaw the end of the discipline, and for this reason I proposed a different reading of the 'dichotomy' itself.

Our case study, the Rishi-missionary dialogue, far from being a straightforward example, reveals many complexities and ambiguities, given the multiplicity of parallel dialogues in which it is embedded. The advantage the case offers is that it depicts the extreme position of a Western Self in its pursuit to define, dominate and absorb the Other. However, while this has been the main thrust of a powerful Self, born from a cogent *Logos*, a weaker Self was giving space to a different approach to the Other. As we have seen from the history of the mission, dialogue was not always the first choice and, when it occurred, it was often troubled and uncertain, involving risk-taking rather than immediate achievements. Despite this, in some cases, the Other has awakened the Self to responsibility and, as Levinas puts it, has motivated its subjected subjectivity as an ethical response, prior to the metaphysical urge for a 'will to power'.

In a recent study on Christian missions among the Tswana of South Africa, as part of a two volume enterprise, Jean and John Comaroff (1991) aim at presenting "the colonization of consciousness", by means of which a small number of Nonconformist missionaries tried to subordinate a large number of people. In their analysis the Comaroffs rely mainly on Gramsci but arrive at conclusions diametrically different from mine. Wanting to write an 'historical anthropology of colonialism', the authors, despite their claim to revindicate the 'real internal dynamism or agency' of the locals, seem to pay more attention to missionary representatives, since "we are told very little indeed concerning the lives, thoughts and motives of the first generations of Tswana converts" (Gray 1993: 197). If this reflects, as every researcher into the history of missions has experienced, the nature of the sources available, it does not excuse the authors from reducing the Tswana to "recalcitrant objects of their [missionaries'] endeavours" (Peel 1992: 328). In fact, in the 'long conversation' between missionaries and Tswana (chap. 6), the latter appear as "a fairly unindividualised mass".

> Most surprising of all is the wholesale neglect of African evangelists, catechists, teachers, church elders etc. - a body of people whom evidence from elsewhere in Africa suggests played the crucial mediating role in religious change (Ibid.: 329).

Further evidence from south India clearly shows how Christian converts to Protestantism "were by no means the passive recipients of evangelism, but, rather, active agents in assessing and acting upon missionary attempts at proselytization" (Caplan 1987:43).

This omission is even more surprising if we consider that the Comaroffs rely on Gramsci's theory of hegemony to "propose a notion of culture as process" (Schoffeleers 1993: 86). Although hegemony is an open concept in Gramscian writings - and thus incorporates religious hegemony - the authors do not seem to see its relevance, given that they "virtually ignore the religious dimension" (Gray 1993: 197), and that they "... evade the difficult, but cardinal, issue of just what sense the Tswana did make of religious teachings they received from the missions" (Peel 1992: 329). A more coherent Gramscian approach would have helped them to make more sense of the fact that the evangelists "....sought to recruit a free citizenry .... but filled their pews with serfs and clients" (Jean & John Comaroff 1991: 261). We will return to discuss the implications of Gramsci's political thought within the more general framework of a Levinasian and Derridian 'politics of ethical difference'. My next point will centre on retracing in the history of the past and in more recent events those salient moments when the weaker missionary Self was able to welcome the Other.

Since the very beginning of the Krishnagar mission we have witnessed a major disagreement within missionary circles between those who supported Rishi conversion to Christianity and those who preferred to dedicate themselves to 'more deserving' groups. Eventually, Mgr. Marietti's dedication to the Rishi cause reaped some results, but these were not consistent enough to dispel the doubt that if the Rishi became Christians, others were prevented from entering the fold. This became a constant complaint and resulted in many missionaries abandoning the Rishi mission. Even those who remained could hardly defend their position, given the Rishis' unsteadiness and lack of commitment to their new faith, and eventually in 1927 the PIME Missionaries retired from Khrishnagar to the more promising mission of Dinajpur, where they are still operating today. They were replaced by the Salesians who, after an initial abandonment of the Rishi, on the grounds presented by their predecessors, decided to launch a campaign for Rishi conversion, but the war in Europe put an end to this enterprise.

The southern mission of Satkhira-Baradal, entrusted to the Calcutta Jesuits, had the same dramatic beginnings as the one in the North, and while some missionaries sought to dedicate themselves to the Rishi, their Bishop decided to abandon this mission. Only later, in 1937, when the Baradal Rishi were harassed by the police and refused help by the Hindu Mahashaba, did they invite the missionaries to return and take care of them. This time, missionary presence was more consistent and the transition in 1952 from one missionary group to another was facilitated (contrary to what happened with the Salesians) by the mediation of Fr. Koster who had dedicated much energy and money to helping the Rishi.

The Xaverians approached the Rishi initially in much the same fashion as other missionaries, with some promoting their cause and others ignoring them altogether. The poor economic situation of the mission and internal disagreements over missionary policy had an adverse effect on the work of those

missionaries who believed that the Rishi were the only group with good prospects for the future. Furthermore, when they were transferred, they took with them their confidence in the Rishi.

Broadly speaking, this situation, partially disrupted after Independence (1971), continued until a group of missionaries started living among the Hindu Rishi (1980). This marked a new approach in mission policy and put into question the work previously done, including the Rishis' conversion to Christianity and their grouping into Parishes and Christian hamlets. The new attitude comprehended both the missionaries who sought another approach to convert the Rishi and those who renounced conversion altogether. The latter did so out of respect for the Rishi rather than, as in previous times, because they considered them unworthy to be Christians or an obstacle to the conversion of others. This shift reflected a general mood in missionary circles and though some missionaries still persisted in a conversion policy, others favoured a different sort of encounter. The latter's understanding of 'God's Kingdom', far from representing a new surge of imperialism (as in the Comaroffs' account of the Nonconformists - "... the Kingdom of God would pave the way for the Empire of Britain" - 1991:79), marked an opening of this 'kingdom' towards realities other than Christianity, and a deconstruction of the monolithic position of Christianity as the only way to 'salvation'.

In this sketchy recapitulation the Rishi seem to disappear as a mere object of missionary concern, but from the evidence presented earlier we know that their role either in becoming Christians or refusing to do so was crucial. In all this, the part played by leaders, catechists and co-workers has been paramount and many of the changes adopted by the missionaries were possible only because provoked by the Rishi themselves. Furthermore, if the latter appear overshadowed by missionary intervention, it is not only because of the sources available, but also because I decided to concentrate on missionary self and identity and on the ways these were changing over time.

If we consider for instance the change that occurred in Khulna over the last forty years (1952-1990, cf. Zene 1993), we can appreciate how this change interested not only younger missionaries reaching the field but also those who had started this mission. In the words of one of these missionaries:

> .... In my juvenile arrogance I thought I was coming here only to give something, instead I understood later that Bengal has a lot to give, and gave me a great deal....[1]

The 'object', in other words, had ceased to be a passive object on whom the missionary inscribed his own story. The first dialogue, however, had to be internal to the mission, where new and old missionary policies confronted each other.[2] Nevertheless, even the older missionaries advocated an abandonment of positions of power and prestige.[3]

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1 Interview with Fr. Marino Rigon, Boyra-Khulna 3-2-1989.

2 "... The Italian Church and society are both in crisis... even missionary vocations have decreased.... The young missionaries coming here brought with them these perplexities, and missionary activity, instead of being a life-time

The missionaries who reached the field during the 70s and 80s displayed the difficulties, tensions, and dilemmas of a new generation trying to promote shifts in mission policy. Specific issues touched upon in the interviews with them ranged from adaptation to the field, the relationship with the local people and especially the local Christians, inter-personal relations within the community and new trends and expectations of mission theology. They also pointed out deficiencies in their training for the mission,[4] and their own mistakes as a result of the impatience to make changes.[5] Despite this, they were positive in assessing their time as a 'continuous search for a new style of presence' in the demanding environment of the Bangladeshi poor,[6] given the 'cultural distance which prevents a real communication between the missionaries and the Bangladeshi people'. The problem was that of reaching a critical position in which the self and the other would be included in a single situation and a single mode of analysis.[7] This allowed, in time, a more humble approach that, reminiscent of the

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commitment, has become an introspective personal search. This resulted in a subjectivity which generated the decline and suspension of the activities as such. Maybe something positive has come of this, but it was also a setback. We have destroyed certain traditions without replacing them with secure foundations and we have been the first victims of this. Certainly our Christians have not felt supported by us, but rather abandoned, disorientated and confused. The traditional, local clergy have seen how we changed direction in many things and they too were disconcerted.... Now we have achieved a more global vision, but still we have no clear aim in mind, no goal at which to direct our efforts..." (Interview with Fr. Aldo Guarniero, Boyra-Khulna 29 -9-1988).

3 "... We should think of gradually retiring from here, and although our presence is still productive, we are too powerful. There are already ten local priests and unless we hand over responsibility to them soon, they will always follow our lead" (Interview with Fr. Bruno Dri, Boyra-Khulna, 2-2-1989).

4 ".... The real struggle, once we reached the mission, was, without any specific preparation, to build up everything from scratch in terms of working with a clear commitment in a Hindu and Muslim environment..." (Interview with Fr. Ernesto Luviè, Jessore, 22-3-1989).
".... When the missionaries returned to Italy, we talked to them, but they always presented a missionary reality similar to that of China... When I reached Bangladesh I did not experience what they had said at all. Nobody told me that Bangladesh was a difficult mission from the point of view of human relations, and that people, both Christians and Non-Christians, don't accept you. Nobody spelled this out clearly to us students..." (Interview with Fr. Rubini, Khulna 27-11-1988).

5 ".... When we started our work in the field, the others respected our aims but we acted contrary to our ideal of community, since it resulted that, for us five, the community was the individual. Some of us managed to implement this ideal within the parish community, while others had to suffer conflicts with the locals. In fact, two out of five have left the mission and the priesthood...." (Interview with Fr. Ernesto Luviè, Jessore, 22-3-1989).

6 "The greatest difficulty for one who comes here is the weight of poverty which submerges you. Since the people know that you are a missionary, and as a foreigner you come here to help them, they load on you all their problems and they pretend that you, as a man of God, will solve all these problems, including their economic and material ones. In this sense, they oppress you, and if you don't fulfil their needs, you are hardly accepted by them. Sometimes we have to refuse this role, but the psychological and moral oppression remains, because these people are demanding....." (Interview with Fr. Ernesto Luviè, Jessore, 22-3-1989).

7 "... I started teaching Hindu ethics to the Hindu students of our school, and to do this properly I started reading the Hindu texts, in particular the Upanishads. There I discovered the singular way of approach the *Gurus* have with their disciples, since the *guru* never give a direct or definite answer but always put new questions to the disciples... I started using the same method with the students that came to see me, and I realised that the method I had been using during the previous years was a very European approach, since, although I did not give money, I was indeed in the position of giving, as for instance, giving knowledge or wisdom. Placing myself in a searching attitude of mind, I realised that the other can discover the truth by himself. When I later went to Bagerhat, this theme became a point of departure and of arrival to verify many of my findings. I don't know how much I have achieved in following this, but I always keep in mind this small rule of not giving direct answers to those who approach me. Not because I want to leave them in doubt, but because I believe that they will come to see themselves that they are able to think and to find the proper answer to their situations...." (Interview with Fr. Rubini, Khulna 27-11-1988).

A note on the Gramscian idea of 'education', which expands on Marx's Theses on Feuerbach "the educator must be educated", is pertinent here: "... This problem can be best related to the modern way of considering educational

'great strategies of the past', envisaged a different attitude towards the mission and its people in general.

These missionaries soon discovered that while "spiritual concepts belong to a few, the problems for survival belong to every one". But although the survival problem could not be evaded, the people were not satisfied with a purely material answer, because this provided only a partial and temporary solution: the challenge for the missionary was how to create an attitude of mutual solidarity among the people:

> As a priest and a *guru* I am called to help them to find the strength to assess their situation and above all to promote among them the idea of solidarity, by way of which they are able to help each other. Unfortunately, most of the time, we destroy their solidarity: they come to us knowing that we are the easiest and quickest way to a false solution to their problem since, when we give this material help - maybe to get rid of them - they stop seeking solutions by themselves and also stop helping each other.....[8]

This solidarity, learned from the poor and re-proposed to them, would become a model for the community of missionaries itself which acquired meaning only through this perspective of bearing witness to others of their own solidarity:[9] "...Our greatest gift to them is to stay in their midst and give of ourselves....".[10] The philosophy of 'discreet presence', as guests rather than protagonists, was intended to reduce the strength and power of both missionary and Church institutions, so that the local Christians and others could make choices for themselves, with the missionaries merely inspiring a local process. On this score, some missionaries saw themselves as inviting the official Church to make courageous declarations and 'political' choices in favour of others, including the Non-Christians.[11]

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doctrine and practice, according to which the relationship between teacher and pupil is active and reciprocal so that every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil a teacher....." (Gramsci 1991: 350).

8 Interview with Fr. Antonio Decembrino, Khulna-Boyra, 18-6-1989.

9 "I would like to announce to the people that 'God does not abandon us', and this can only be done through a testimony of life. Otherwise it is meaningless to preach this, when we missionaries are unable to live together among ourselves.... In this case, our priority will not be how much we can achieve, but the witnessing of a religious community where we live and pray together. This gives us the strength to be with 'others', near to them and able to understand them... Furthermore, we have always stressed the fact that we are here 'for the other', but we have not given enough evidence to show that we are here to announce Someone, with clear religious signs, signs not only of 'charity' but also of 'faith', ... This is for me the future of the mission: living the moments of faith, of our consecrated life, strongly rooted in everyday reality. We are always discussing what we should do, but we are ashamed of praying together, and this is like wanting to produce something without even possessing the raw material.... If we, along with our Christian communities, are able to vitalise this raw material and give a shape to it, we will also fulfil our role as helpers, solving the people's problems by living side by side with them..." (Ibid.).

10 Interview with Fr. Osvaldo Torresani, Khulna-Boyra, 19-6-1989

11 "... As I see it, dialogue happens also when the Church places itself at the forefront as a stimulus for others. Here, instead, we have a Church which is stagnant and fully satisfied in dispensing the 'sacraments'. The social field, the trade union movements or the defence of Tribals are non-existent. Dialogue means that the Church is ready to risk, not only in utopia, but also in reality. If the fear of not getting a visa keeps us missionaries always on the defensive, why do we stay here? We must risk a mission dialogue which is part of life, not far removed from it, since dialogue is the encounter with people, Christians and Non-Christians, who enter at the heart of problematic situations. If the Government of Bangladesh carries out a policy of sterilisation among the Tribals, and the Christian Churches are unable to intervene, their presence becomes meaningless. It is even more meaningless, when these Churches react only when the Government proclaims Islam as the State religion. We do not dirty our hands when for instance there are strikes in the country, in order to defend the right to strike or the services which belong to the whole community. If the

It is, in fact, this 'political dimension of dialogue' which returns me to my introduction and establishes its connection with this 'partial conclusion', or moment of further reflection, inspired by a Derridian reading of Levinas and by a Gramscian experience of 'Otherness'.

My attempt to compare the 'crisis' of anthropology with the 'crisis' of mission (since both find it difficult -if not impossible- to justify their 'intrusion' into the Other's space) has been motivated by the common ground shared by these two enterprises, given that both rest on Western metaphysics which represents the epitome of the absorption of the Other by the Same. It is not by advocating the end of mission activity or the end of anthropology that the Western Self will cease exercising its power over the Other. On the contrary, the alternative to the recurrent mood of negativity is to promote a different approach to both mission and anthropology. Even the solution of renouncing 'the talismanic properties of Otherness', is partial and in need of a more radical discourse and for this reason I have suggested following a Levinasian reading of alterity whereby the Same becomes a responsible and ethical self subjected to the Other.

The difficulty we are faced with is both terminological and methodological. For instance: when Levinas uses the word 'ethics', is he not returning to the metaphysical tradition of a totalising self he wishes to abandon? What is the difference between Levinasian ethics and 'Christian ethics', as applied by the missionary, or professional ethics as observed by the anthropologist? (cf. Fluehr-Lobban 1991). Following Critchley's[12] suggestion of reading Levinas through Derridian deconstruction, I attempt to address these questions as well as others concerning our enquiry.

Since "deconstruction is a double reading that operates within a double bind of both belonging to a tradition, a language, and a philosophical discourse, while at the same time being incapable of belonging to the latter.....", Critchley proposes, through *clôtural* reading, to introduce a moment of alterity contained in deconstruction:

> Following both Levinas's account of the history of Western philosophy in terms of the primacy of an ontology which seeks to enclose all phenomena within the closure of comprehension[13] and reduce plurality to unity and his critique of the ontological concept of history, which is always the history of the victors, never of the victims..... against which Levinas speaks in tones very similar to those of Walter Benjamin when the latter opposes historical materialism to objectivist history, it will be argued that the notion of *clôtural* reading allows the question of ethics to be

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Church is able to defend its own rights and yet keeps silent, out of fear, when it should defend others, its message becomes completely useless...." (Interview with Fr. Osvaldo Torresani, Khulna-Boyra, 19-6-1989).

12 Critchley belongs, together with Robert Bernasconi, to a group of philosophers at the University of Essex who lately have dedicated much time to studying the impact of Levinas on recent European philosophy. This influence seems destined to affect also anthropological reflection, in as much as it takes into account the ethical and political dimensions of the discipline.

13 "The very activity of thinking, which lies at the basis of epistemological, ontological and veridical comprehension, is the reduction of plurality to unity and alterity to sameness. The activity of philosophy, the very task of thinking, is the reduction of otherness. In seeking to think the other, its otherness is reduced or appropriated to our understanding. To think philosophically is to comprehend - comprendre, comprehendere, begreifen, to include, to seize, to grasp - and master the other, thereby reducing its alterity" (Critchley 1992: 29)

> raised within deconstruction. *Clôtural* reading is history read from the standpoint of the victims of that history. It is, in a complex sense, ethical history (Critchley 1992: 30).

This allows us not only to approach Levinasian ethics from a different perspective, but also to move to the centre of our study those others, the Rishi, who are the 'victims' in this case. It is, in fact, in trying to respect their alterity that it becomes problematic for us to use a logocentric, totalising language which nullifies alterity while trying to convey a message that wishes to obtain the opposite result. For this very reason, my 'thinking' the Rishi and my writing about them are called into question, for I too use this language as I try to prove that Levinasian ethics precedes my thinking and writing.

Derrida's reading of the efforts made by Husserlian phenomenology to overcome Heideggerian metaphysical closure,[14] is seen by Critchley "as a transgression of the metaphysical tradition and as a restoration of that tradition", which "contains within itself the trace or 'the scar' of an irreducible alterity" (Critchley 1992: 75). It is in the suspension of choice - or 'undecidability'- between the metaphysical and the non-metaphysical, "a suspension provoked in, as, and through a practice of *clôtural* reading" - Critchley claims - "that the ethical dimension of deconstruction is opened and maintained...." (Ibid.: 192).[15] Undecidability, however, presents a limitation in addressing the question of politics, as Critchley shows in analysing the works of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy who maintain that Heideggerian completion of philosophy results in political totalitarianism[16] including also Western democratic liberalism, since, according to them, "there is nothing democratic about the liberal state" (Ibid.: 211).

In order both to answer the question on the possibility of politics that does not reduce transcendence and alterity,[17] and to overcome 'the impasse of the political in Derrida's work', Critchley turns to Levinasian ethics to disrupt every form of political totalitarianism (e.g. National Socialism) and immanentism, including Western liberal democracy.[18]

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14 " The concept of closure divides the concept of metaphysics along the irreconcilable yet inseparable axes of transgression and restoration, of belonging and not belonging, of the break and the continuation" (Critchley 1992: 75).

15 The undecidability of a rigorous clôtural reading "has its horizon in the thought of irreducible responsibility, an affirmation of alterity (Ibid.: 199).

16 "Totalitarianism is a modern despotism in which the social is represented as something without anything beyond it - that is to say, without any transcendence. In totalitarianism, power has no outside; it is the total immanence of the social in the political. It is politics without transcendence, without reminder or interruption.... the complete atrophy of transcendence in an immanent society - and the failure of traditional philosophy to think the political essentially...." (Ibid.: 206-7).

17 " A re-inscription of the transcendence of the political does not aim at restoring transcendence by founding the political on the transcendental signified of God, man, history, or destiny: rather, it is necessary to rethink the political without the nostalgia for a lost plenitude of presence...." (Ibid.: 217).

18 "We must ask ourselves if liberalism is all we need to achieve an authentic dignity for the human subject" (Levinas, E. Prefatory Note to 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism', *Critical Enquiry* **17**: 62-3, quoted by Critchley 1992: 222).

> Levinas attempts to build a bridge from ethics, understood as a responsible, non-totalizing relation to the Other, to politics, conceived of as a relation to the third part (*le tiers*), to all the others, to the plurality of beings that make up the community.... The passage from ethics to politics is synonymous with the move from responsibility to questioning, from the proximity of the one-for-the-other to a relation with all the others whereby I feel myself to be an other like the others and where the question of justice can be raised..... (Ibid.: 220).

With the move to the 'third party' - from ethics to politics - Levinas recognises a double community, "both equal and unequal, symmetrical and asymmetrical, political and ethical" which he names 'monotheism', "linking together the question of God and the question of the community". However, as we have already stated in the introduction, the Levinasian God,[19] being only a trace in the face of the Other,[20] presents itself as different from the God of onto-theo-logy.

> What prevents the community from becoming wholly immanent to itself is the transcendence of the relation to the Other, a transcendence that comes from the order of trace, the trace as the opening of the divine as an absence (Ibid.:228).

This new conception of the organisation of political space, far from representing a-politicism and quietism, disrupts the logic of Heideggerian fundamental ontology for which "to die for the Other is always secondary" (ibid.:225). For Levinas, instead, 'politics begins as ethics, that is, as the possibility of sacrifice' which interrupts 'all attempts at totalization, totalitarianism, or immanentism' (ibid.). In other words, the closure of ontology already contains a break through which the 'trace' makes itself present, given that the Same is such because of the Other, the centre is centre because of periphery, and the Said is Said because it is preceded by the Saying. Whilst the Said (*le dit*) represents the power of ontology, the appropriation of time, the occupation of space "in which objectification, universalization, representation, consciousness, experience, phenomenality, givenness, and presence orient and ... dominate its thought" (Peperzak 1993:36), the Saying (*le dire*) is the primordial moment that generated our Said and remains as a trace that cannot be remembered. This Saying, however, is not completely lost and, in its anachronism, returns as a 'surprise' to 'unsay' (*dédire*) what we have said. But whilst 'Heideggerian questioning remains caught in the play of Said and Unsaid' (ibid.:218), the diachronical interruption of Saying transcends fundamental ontology:

> So long as we remain with the Said - in the framework of ontology - we have the Saying behind us; but we cannot remember it because it has its own uncollectible time. We point to Saying in criticizing the Said and its time, but the discussion or description of the Saying changes it into a Said, which demands a new critique in turn. As soon as we have said something about Saying, we must take our distance from this Said, too. Saying (*dire*) and unsaying or denying (*dédire*) fashion the halting way in which we think back on the preceding Saying. Every denial, however, is necessarily followed by a new Saying, which as a repetition indeed wants to say what was brought to the fore and then negated. This 'saying again' (*redire*) is not a dialectical synthesis but

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19 "The singular character of this transcendence would have to be noted, because the transcendence of the divine in Levinas is the alterity of the trace, an order irreducible to presence and the possibility of incarnation. The God of Levinas is not the God of onto-theo-logy, but rather.... God 'is' an empty place, the anarchy of an absence at the heart of the community" (Critchley 1992: 228).

20 "... The passage to *le tiers*, to justice and humanity as a whole, is also a passage to the prophetic word, the commonness of the divine father in a community of brothers...." (Ibid.: 227-8).

> rather a new attempt in the history of the continual Saying that suffers and settles its own (im)possibility (Peperzak 1993:219).

Although the passage to politics represents for Levinas a return to the Said, questioning, ontology and the language of philosophy, he maintains that "ethics is always already political, the relation to the face is always already a relation to a whole...." (Critchley 1992:226). In fact, although for Levinas the proximity to the Other "is troubled and becomes a problem with the entry of the third party" (Levinas 1981: 157), Critchley maintains that "the ethical relation is always already troubled and problematized.... From the first, my ethical discourse is troubled and doubled into a political discourse with all others: a double discourse" (Critchley 1992: 230-1). For this reason the Said, 'informed and interrupted by the trace of the Saying' (Ibid.: 229), becomes a 'justified Said', and philosophy is not defined as 'the love of wisdom', but as 'wisdom of love at the service of love' (Levinas 1981: 162).

> The justified Said is a political discourse of reflection and interrogation, a language of decision, judgement and critique that is informed and interrupted by the responsibility of ethical Saying.... The move to *le tiers* in Levinas, and the consequent turn to politics, the Said, ontology, and philosophy, is not a betrayal of ethical Saying, but rather represents the attempt to traverse the passage from ethics to politics without reducing the dimension of transcendence.... The trust of Levinas's argument is to show how the universality of political rationality cannot ignore the pre-rational singularity of my ethical respect for the Other (Critchley 1992: 233-4).

> Philosophy is the enactment of this alternating movement between the Saying and the Said, between ethical love and political wisdom, a double movement that both justifies and criticizes the laws of the polis (Ibid.: 235).

Only by following this "Levinasian move from the Other to *le tiers*, from responsibility to the question" can deconstruction, according to Critchley, overcome its political impasse. Since in Derridian terms 'Democracy does not exist' because it has a futural or *différantial* structure, democracy could represent the future of deconstruction:

> To say that democracy does not exist is to say that democracy is always democracy to come (à*venir*). Democracy is an infinite task and an infinite responsibility directed towards the future (*l'avenir*); its temporality is that of advent. To think of democracy as futural is to take up the ethico-political obligation to invent democracy ..... (Ibid.: 240).

There appears to be a clear relation between the Said of anthropology and the ontology of a totalizing self ready to authorise others. There is also a movement from the Said to the Saying of anthropology with a difference in which the Saying is prior to theories and enquiries, academic requirements and positions of power within the discipline. Although a return to the Said is inevitable when writing about the Other, in ethnography, this Said could represents a *différance* from the first one, if the encounter and the proximity with the Other is not forgotten, but awakens responsibility. From this point of view, the Other is able to open anthropology to the third party, *le tiers* in Levinasian sense, since in the face of the Other I see the suffering of others. The passage from ethics to politics in anthropology is complicated and problematic as it is in Levinas's discourse, but

nevertheless, necessary, if we do not want to run the risk of fostering a discipline which promotes a-political quietism and keeps 'a murderous silence in front of the dying face of the Other'.[21]

I turn now to discuss the political implications of Gramsci's thought both in its specific application of ethical politics and in support of my line of enquiry. If Gramsci's thought is closer to an 'immanent' reading of world history, his emphasis on personal commitment and responsibility for others, takes him closer to a Derridian and Levinasian ethical politics.[22]

It has been suggested that Gramsci's "fragmentary, multiple, incisive and spiral writing" is close to Derrida's deconstruction: "Crossing as he does different levels of language (philosophy, journalism, politics), mingling them in a work without end, Gramsci the writer already transgresses the traditional divisions, the ideologies of closed knowledge, a certain type of division of intellectual labour...." (Buci-Glucksmannnn 1980: 9). It is difficult in this sense to successfully use one particular Gramscian theory without taking into account the magnitude of his incomplete and fragmented science of political practice. Gramsci's philosophical project, calling into question the status of philosophy, was meant to establish "a new relation between philosophy, culture and politics" (ibid.: 10). In this sense, 'he never posed abstract problems that were separate and divorced from everyday life' (Lisa 1973: 77, quoted in Buci-Glucksmannn 1980: 3), since he worked towards the transformation of reality through "the attainment of higher awareness, with the aid of which one succeeds in understanding one's own historical value, one's own function in life, one's own rights and obligations" (*Political Writings* 1910-20, p.11).

The connection established by Gramsci between politics and culture made him find a way, despite his segregation in a state prison, to become a philosopher of the masses. The crisis generated in Italy by a totalitarian apparatus and widespread poverty were for Gramsci more important than his misfortunes, and this struggle for freedom became a defiance of the fascists who sought 'to stop that brain from functioning'. As Germino (1990: 13) puts it: "For Antonio Gramsci politics is the process of including people who had been excluded and of merging the periphery with the centre". His own experience as a hunchback and a Sardinian played an important role in developing 'a theory of politics based on including the excluded' (ibid.: 12), but instead of feeling pity for himself and for the Sardinian people,[23] he rejected "closure in favour of openness and 'broadening out' " (ibid.). Since for

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21 The initiative promoted by Pat Caplan and others at the ASA Decennial conference in Oxford, July 1993, for a joint statement of Anthropologists against ethnic violence in Bosnia is but one example of a clear ethical political commitment of people involved in the discipline. Although the validity or efficacy of such statements is open to doubt, it remains nevertheless a step in the right direction assuming a concrete responsibility and making it public.

22 This discussion will be necessarily limited and fragmented, giving only some general guidelines for further research into the application of Gramsci's thought in social anthropology and related disciplines.

23 Being particularly sensitive to theories of Sardinians "as biologically inferior to the Italians on the mainland", for Gramsci "Sardinia was the laboratory in which the injustice of the larger world could be measured". This 'laboratory' can be justified by the fact that although Sardinia was seen as oppressed by the mainland, its own social order reflected

Gramsci "the search for the Leitmotiv, for the rhythm of the thought as it develops, should be more important than that for single casual affirmations and isolated aphorisms" (Gramsci 1971: 383), it can be established that the leitmotif holding the parts of the Prison Notebooks together "is a vision of a new politics oriented towards the *emarginati* [marginalised] rather than towards the prestigious and the powerful. Nothing in the notebooks is irrelevant to this vision, because 'everything is political' " (Germino 1990: 253). The use of architectural metaphors, employed to emphasise 'the arrangement of space to accommodate the social body', gave him the opportunity to compare himself to an architect who, although prevented from building anything materially (given his imprisonment), can still work on designs. The immateriality of the metaphor is extended to his role as political architect who "deals with the impalpable relationships that lie hidden in material things. His space is more elusive and does not respond to fixed designs" (Ibid.). In this sense, Gramscian politics "indicate a new social space in which the distinction between leaders and led has been 'attenuated.... to the point of disappearance' " (Ibid.: 254).

This is not to deny that Gramsci was thinking in concrete political terms of promoting the expansion of Marxism in the West - given that the revolution of 1917 had stopped at the Russian borders - by using Croce's philosophy, just as Marx used Hegel. But Croce's philosophy lacked that unity of theory and practice, of philosophy and politics that became essential in developing a mature Gramscian thought. Furthermore, the continuous evolution of his theories, rather than representing a blatant ambiguity (cf. Anderson 1977), depicts a return to the leitmotif so that his 'research into the state' is not separate from his "research into Marxist philosophy in its relationship to the masses" (Buci-Glucksmannn 1980: 13), hence becoming a severe critique of Marxist totalitarianism.[24]

Although it may seem that we have come a long way from Derridian deconstruction of metaphysics and Levinasian understanding of ethical politics, in my view Gramsci represents a moment of serious reflection towards a politics where the near Other was to play an important role in opening towards *le tiers*, the third party, or 'the others' of political commitment. His 'new politics of inclusion' of marginalised people in society could not be implemented by charitable philanthropy alone: "...Gramsci makes clear that the new politics can come about only through an intellectual and moral *metanoia*, or transformation, of consciousness", but aware that the dominant sector would make only partial concessions, he maintained that "the initiative for such a transformation must come from the depressed strata themselves" (Germino 1990: 260). At the same time, he asks the intellectuals to

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the same pattern "of oppression by the powerful over the weak" (Germino 1990: 11). Gramsci, however, did not try to solve Sardinia's problems in a 'tribal direction' but sought "to transcend immediate, unhealthy narcissistic concern for self and to empathise with the 'prestigeless' whoever and wherever they were" (Ibid.: 13).

24 "By rejecting any kind of instrumental model of the state as the weapon of a ruling class endowed with consciousness and will, Gramsci not only avoids the characteristic political blockage of the Second International, but also escapes the problematic of the state as violence, the basis in fact of Stalinist theory and practice in this field" (Buci-Glucksman 1980: 13).

transform themselves by abandoning their 'caste' and becoming 'organic leaders' for those at the periphery. If Gramsci's atheism puts him in 'opposition' to Levinas's theism, his transcendence of 'petrified religiousness' and of 'reductionist materialist positivism' bring the two together in a common commitment to the Other.

> The Notebooks record the action of a mind determined to continue the struggle for a new, inclusive politics, a struggle begun three decades before in Sardinia. Gramsci had empathised with the retarded boy chained in a hovel in the vacant countryside, with the workers in the mines who had to boil roots for nourishment, and with shepherds who could not afford to buy shoes... (Germino 1990: 222).

If I have followed this trajectory of presentation moving from the Rishi-missionary dialogue, through the Derrida-Levinas encounter searching for a viable ethical politics to Gramscian new politics of inclusion, it is because, by following Gramsci, I wish to make "an inventory of the traces deposited by the historical process" that brought me to be who I am.[25] I did not plan to refer to a theory of alterity before starting my reflection on the Rishi-missionary encounter, and in a way I had not planned to re-read Gramsci's writings. Gramsci's experience and mine have been quite different, since I found myself for a long time committed to a 'religious cause', but the starting point and the final destinations are the same. I have always had a great reluctance to enter into active politics, given the experience of both Christian Democrats and leftists in Sardinia as well as the rest of Italy, but my choices have always been motivated by 'political' conviction. From this perspective, social anthropology, as I understand it, cannot avoid taking on board ethical politics, if it is to evolve towards a discipline open to the Other, combining 'humaneness' with rigour.

If anthropology has the power to discuss and unmask the power of other institutions, this can be done by making concrete choices and placing the Other in a privileged position whereby the discipline cannot escape responsibility, while judging the power of others. Aware of its own power, anthropology has also become aware of its weaknesses and limitations, so that no dogmas can be imposed in the name of 'truths' to be defended. This 'finitude', far from representing the end of a discipline, allows it to 'learn through suffering' by sharing the suffering of others.

To conclude this reflection, I come back to the starting-point, the Rishi-missionary encounter. The Rishi, as discussed in Part One, are 'Untouchables' who aspire to be part of Hindu society. In terms of Critchley's '*clôtural* reading' of a Derridian understanding of metaphysical closure, we can say

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25 In a more biographical mode, although this was not a genre favoured by Gramsci, I am tempted here to draw a parallel with my fellow countryman. Being a Sardinian like him, having lived in the same village where he lived (I lived for a period nearby the village where Gramsci was born [Ales] and moved with my family to Ghilarza, where he resided for a time before going to Turin), and moving later to the 'Continent' to complete my studies, I soon came to realise the low opinion the 'Continent people' had of the Sardinians. My religious formation motivated me when I was very young to become a priest, but seeing the attitude and life of diocesan priests in Sardinia, so distant from the poor, I decided to become a missionary, whom I saw at that time as people spending their lives for others. That first experience in Sardinia motivated many of my future choices, giving space in my life to people who had always remained at the margins. Indeed I have received from them much more than I could ever give, and if I am appealing for social anthropology to make a clear commitment, it is because I am sure that these Others have much to teach the discipline.

that the Rishis' experience is a moment of 'transgression and restoration, belonging and not-belonging, break and continuation' of a tradition, revealing an alterity that cannot be reduced and that, at the same time, places them 'on the limit' of a text written by others and deconstructed by them. If the liminality is for them ambiguity, it is also a way out beyond the closure, since they tenaciously preserve a 'trace' of alterity (*Amrao je manus!*) not contained in the closure. Again, in terms of the Levinasian 'Saying and Said', we can suggest that they will need to return to the language of philosophy, or the Said of their tradition, and only after the Said has being unSaid by their Saying will it make a difference. An example of this re-reading can be found in the experience of the Bagerhat Rishi community.[26] Through the Upanishadic concept of Oneness (*Eka*),[27] the missionary there managed to motivate the Rishi to integrate themselves in the local community - but with a difference: their being oppressed by others did not prevent them from 'being responsible' for the sufferings of their 'enemies'. So when Muslims or caste Hindus found themselves in trouble, the Rishi community helped them:

> .. What was amazing wasn't the fact that they gave their money away but that they, oppressed and despised by society, had understood the essence of a person: one becomes a person when he/she is able to give his/her life for the other, when they give something, which belongs to them, gratis to others. It is not their level of education nor even the place they occupy in society that makes them *manus*, but their ability to discover others and their needs, and to pay personally for others...[28]

The Onenness of Hindu cosmology must be distinguished from the monolithic concept of Western metaphysics, which obliterates alterity and difference. In fact, it is related within an open framework to other ideas such as 'illumination', *mukti* , active non-violence and the *guru*-disciple relationship. Shaping his relationship with the Rishi on this model, the missionary too deconstructs his role to find an uncertain identity in contrast with his past, but promising for the future, although risky and unpredictable.[29]

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26 Between January 1978 and April 1983, the Bagerhat community were exposed to a new experience. Fr. Rubini, together with his disciple, came to live in Bagerhat with the intention of creating a monastic community incarnated in a Hindu environment. Although this remained Fr. Rubini's primary purpose, he tried to maintain good relations with the Christians, celebrating Sunday Mass with them, and, at the same time, reminding them of the aim of their presence which was not to care for the Christians' social and economic welfare; for such matters they had to contact their Parish Priest in Khulna.

27 " I tried to find within their innermost self certain values which, so it seems, were not externally visible..... In the Upanishad I found the central idea of *Ek- Ekan* (One/Oneness) which is fundamental in Hindu culture. By Upanishad I do not mean the simple text of sacred writings but the development of these into what became the overall ferment of a culture, where an idea is part of life and becomes collective property. Thus, Upanishad, which could be translated as 'sitting at the *guru*'s feet', reflects a 'harmonious relationship', or simply a 'rapport/union', which is the idea of *Ek*... If I am one with God and You are one with God, we both are one... I explained this to them in these terms: 'You are one with God, your wife is one with God, so you are one with her and with your children....'. This 'chain-reaction' had an instant effect on them and they didn't need explanations, since, although they had never articulated it, it was inside them, because this is in their manner of thinking and speaking, it is in their own realm of being...." (Interview with Fr. Carlo Rubini, Khulna, 27-11-1988).

28 Ibid.

29 "... The situation of *Guru-Sisu* could be fruitfully used in the relationship between the Rishi and the missionaries. The Guru's rule is to give partial answers, giving the disciple the freedom of a personal discovery. This could certainly be a new style of doing mission, and also of preaching to our Christians. Instead of dictating beautiful theological explanations or biblical exegesis, we should prompt them to discover realities and values for themselves, urging them to be actors in the first person rather than passive receivers. To do this, of course, there is the need to abandon, or at least

Some of the conclusions reached in Bagerhat have become important also for the Chuknagar Hindu Rishi and for the missionaries working among them.[30] In consequence, these missionaries have sought to open the group to the experience of others who also suffer poverty and segregation, and to Muslims and caste Hindus sympathetic to marginalised groups. In time these links may materialise into political action to destabilise the *status quo* and to subvert the 'established order' of high and low, pure and impure, touchable and Untouchable. But the immediate challenge for the Rishi is a transformation of consciousness, in Gramscian terms an 'intellectual and moral *metanoia*', which will be possible only when some of them are ready to shed their blood for others.[31] Missionaries and others come and go, but they are to remain there.

From this perspective, even the dichotomy Muchi/Christians is misleading, since a solution will not be reached by attaching a Christian label to the 'Muchi' reality.[32] Given that being a 'Muchi' is economically viable and could also perhaps be made socially acceptable, provided the Rishi renounce poisoning cattle and eating carrion, their activity would make sense in economic terms and would also be a positive affirmation of an identity that has proved almost impossible to escape. Here again, in Gramscian terms, "intellectual and moral reformation is indissolubly tied to a program of economic reformation which is the concrete mode in which one presents any intellectual moral reformation"

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to open, the mission compound to a new outside influence.... Such a jump places us in a defenceless position where we are valued for what we are and not for what we possess. Not preaching from a podium, we are accepted or rejected according to what people feel about us.... We should always be serene and transmit peace, otherwise we ourselves are beyond Oneness; but we all know how difficult this is, when outside some call us 'red monkey'... [expression of contempt used to address the British in the past, and now used for Westerners in general] (Ibid.).
It would be interesting here to compare this with the Gramscian idea of 'active pedagogy', or the teacher-pupil relationship as hegemony, "as the form of a social relation on a social scale.... As against (this) idealist pedagogy, as well as mere libertarian pedagogy, Gramsci sought an active principle that is in fact an aspect of the question of hegemony. Since all education is also 'self-education', the pupil being neither a 'recipient' nor a passive 'record', it must be a pedagogy of promotion' " (Buci-Glucksmann 1980: 387/395; cf. also Broccoli 1972).

30 " 1) We cannot limit ourselves to the Rishi group, otherwise they will convince themselves that they really are 'the lowest', while there are others in the same situation. 2) We should encourage them to make a move from 'slavery' to 'service': it will be a tremendous improvement if some of those we have helped can then contribute to promoting others within the group. 3) Up until now we have worked from the bottom upwards, but we have to modify our strategy: if we find some caste Hindus or Muslims who are willing to support the cause of the Rishi and other such groups, we know that one word uttered by them is valued more than a hundred of ours. 4) Our primary target remains the work for the social uplift of the group, and whilst the religious factor is not excluded, this will be a slow process involving individual growth" (Fr. Luigi Paggi, communication, Khulna, 18-4- 1989).

31 The point made earlier about the Bagerhat community, whereby one becomes *manus* when one is able to give one's life for others, seems to be relevant also for the Chuknagar Rishi. This recalls both the Levinasian ethical self-sacrifice and Gramsci's idea of political leader: "Speaking autobiographically, Gramsci compares himself , as secretary-general of the Communist Party, to the captain of a sinking ship. The captain's absolute obligation, in case of shipwreck, to be the last to abandon ship and to go down with it if necessary, is not irrational.... Gramsci had frequently been asked why he had not left fascist Italy while there was still time and thereby avoided imprisonment. This is the answer...." (Germino 1990: 243-4).

32 ".... These Christians would only go to the missionary to complain that others call them 'Muchi', but would never go to a Hindu or a Muslim to object 'don't call me Muchi, because I am a Christian!'. It would be fairer if we tackled the problem directly: 'OK, you are Christians, but you are Muchi, and you have to cope with this...', since I think that we could create a space for a different approach... We run too easily behind the Christian label, thinking that we can solve everything with that. ...." (Interview with Frs. A. Casey, R. Tobanelli and J. Devine, London, 29-1-1993).

(Germino 1990: 260). From this point of view "... Chuknagar is not about the Muchi, but about Untouchability and how to make the Untouchables 'touchables', as they are gaining their dignity...".[33]

If during the 70's and 80's the Rishi issue attracted the attention of many missionaries, lately the focus seems to have moved in other directions. Apart from considering other groups, both Hindu and Muslim, who share the same position as the Rishi in Bangladeshi society, the Xaverians have become increasingly involved with the Mandi Tribals of Mymensing and those Tribals who migrate to Dhaka in search of fortune. This choice, rather than a betrayal of the Rishi cause, could be read as a development and a passage to a more global understanding of Bangladeshi reality, a movement from ethics to politics whereby the intervention of *le tiers* demands wider responsibility. Much will depend on how the missionaries operating in this 'new' environment endorse ethico-political choices.

We can interpret in a similar fashion the decision of certain missionaries who, on return to Europe from the so-called 'mission territories', renounced the comfort of a suburban community house to live in the East End of London. Behind this choice there lies something more than the mere "option for the poor".

> .....In my view, mission today is no longer a geographical entity, but rather a social, anthropological mission. In this sense, mission comes to mean abandoning the cultural, Christian environment or, if you prefer, the environment organised and established around Christian values, and choosing a peripheral environment. Here in the West, this means the inner cities....[34]

The passage from the Other to the third party, or from ethics to politics, appears clearly from Fr. Tobanelli's experience in London's East End. In commenting on this experiment, he draws a parallel between the Rishi and the inner-city dwellers, where geographical segregation is but one common reality. The separation goes deeper into a social and cultural segregation, given that these people are not in a position to make use of opportunities offered to others in the free market. Hence they are blamed by society for the place they occupy in it. Like the Rishi, who dispose of 'dangerous substances', inner-city inhabitants are functional to the system, with the unemployed safeguarding the jobs of others and helping keep salaries low. Moreover, these groups tend to become endogamous and hereditary, in so far as those born here perpetuate the existing situation, thus developing into a group of 'Untouchables'.

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33 "We have been working for generations with the Christians and we did not reach the same level we have obtained in Chuknagar, because in the parishes we are attacking the 'Muchi' thing... We should not have a parish priest in Satkhira and Baradal, but people who are committed to the Rishi, knowing that this group is different and that it is not enough to change a name...." (Ibid.).

34 Interview with Fr. R. Tobanelli, London 9-2-1993.

Involvement in such missions 'on the periphery' has been the cause of much personal struggle for Fr. Tobanelli whose way of life goes against 'traditional' missionary practice and the often stereotypical figure of missionary priest.[35]

> ... When you leave your environment, you also leave the security of your position, of your priesthood in a Christian environment. In this new dynamic situation you discover that you are a 'nobody', since you are stripped of your cultural baggage. By accepting to be one of them you start to see reality with their eyes, and although you can never free yourself from your background, you start a process which requires an ascetic capability whereby you abandon your convictions and your own past history. In this venture you remain alone and naked, with only your faith, and the other in front of you who challenges you and your certainties.... It was on this premise that the desire in me grew to be physically present among the drug-addicts, the Rishi, or in the East End, giving an ascetic interpretation to our mission, where we get rid of the immediate interests of a constituted Church. Throwing away the 'Judaic law', as St. Paul did, I am trying to become "Gentile with the Gentiles and Jewish with the Jews....."

Fr. Tobanelli hopes to return to the Rishi by the end of 1994 to live amongst them without 'conversion' - "the conversion of the other is part of that baggage that I need to abandon" - for it carries with it a double risk. Firstly, it is a false solution to the Rishis' 'Untouchability' since they continue to be treated as such after becoming Christians, and secondly, 'conversion', which should be considered a spiritual-religious experience, becomes devalued and reduced to an act of immediate convenience where 'aggregation to Christianity' and 'ecclesialization' are confused with 'God's plan'. Instead he works to create a space for mutual respect and acceptance. But it is a style of presence which is felt as a threat by other missionaries.

> ... Other missionaries ... do not experience the same as us and feel intimidated... Our relationship with the Rishi has become for us a radical dialogue in which we are exposed to them and vice versa. It is a risky dialogue in this sense, because although we are free to create our role as 'priests', they can destroy that role when they think it no longer holds... In their culture there is this ability to make your activity relevant or irrelevant according to their immediate objectives. But in the long run, what preoccupies them is to read your heart, to understand your disposition towards them, and if they see respect and commitment, they are able to forgive you everything. There is a sense of dignity in them which demands this power of respect.... Here lies also the absurdity and the seriousness of your question: "How come these dynamics and this challenge originating from your relationship with this given group, do not become one of the fundamental and essential issues of your discussion on missionary policy? Or why does it not become a coagulant element of your efforts and a term for comparison...?" The dynamics of these relationships, this dialogical encounter could become for us a unifying concept with which to value and implement individual and community goals....[36]

But maybe the answer to my questions and his is not to be found in a 'unifying concept', which would go against dialogue itself, but in the capability of a 'mission' which, in the style of Derridian democracy, is a mission that does not exist, in the sense that, starting from today, there is a responsibility - *encore un effort* - to invent it, a mission *à venir*, characterised by incompleteness and deferral.

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35 Quoting Jacques Maritain, he maintained that : "... Before deciding what to do for others, or before aggregating to a group which works for others, it is essential to live among the people and to become one of them...".

38 Ibid.

The Rishi, for their part, though 'losers' in current socio-economic and political terms, demonstrate an aptitude to be effective partners in dialogue. They have neither place nor voice, but their plea grows louder in their search for humanity. The very stubbornness of their quest is an example for both the missionary and the anthropologist who, like the Rishi, are currently re-negotiating their identity. Thus, the enquiring self, even when dictating the conditions of its own ethical rules and the commitment of its own political choices, is constantly displaced and is asked to learn from those who cannot afford and/or are not permitted to be ethical or political. For even Christianity, though recurrently misused by those in power, is constantly challenged by those at the periphery and remains the history of 'lesser people'.

TABLES
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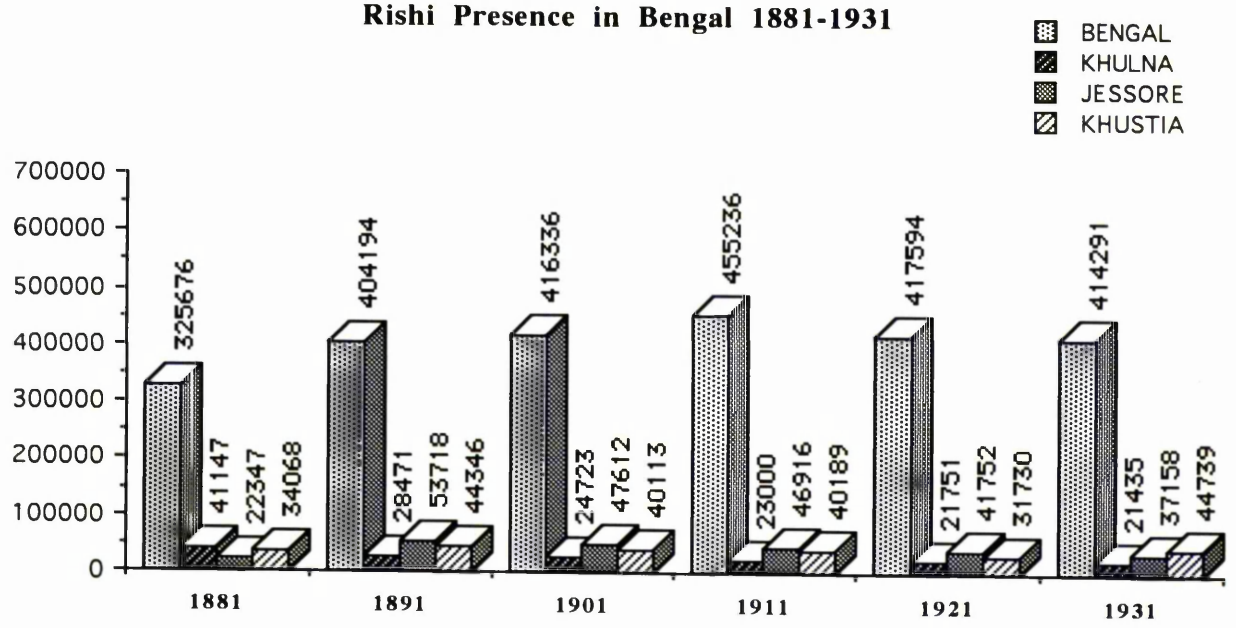
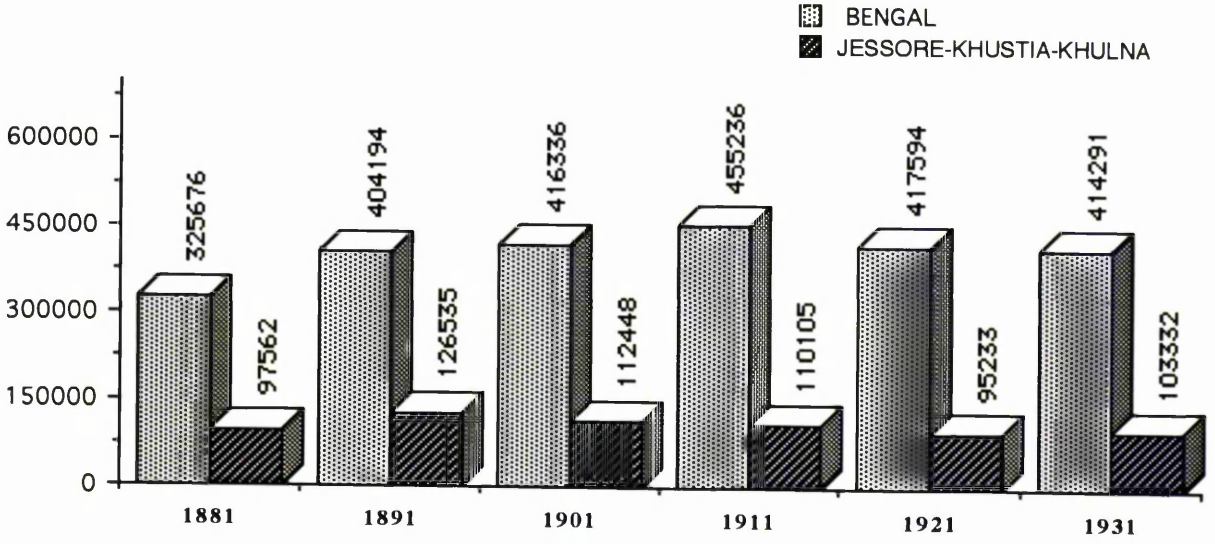
APPENDIX

TABLE 1

Rishi Presence in Bengal 1881-1931





Source: Census of India, Imperial Gazetteers of India, Bengal District Gazetteers.

TABLE 2 Rishi in Khulna and Satkhira (P. Lupi 1980)

THANA	Thana Population	Rishi Population	Rishi Para	Rishi Families	Rishi Families emigrated to India 1970-1980	Hindu Rishi Families	Christian Rishi Fam.	
							Cathol.	Prot.
FULTOLA	73,892	854	6	122	4	104	18	===
DUMURIA	180,411	5,453	24	779	21	770	===	9
PAIKGACHA	258,080	2,450	35	350	7	307	43	===
DACOPE	89,381	1,274	19	182	=	133	49	===
BHATIAGATA	90,348	432	12	56	=	56	===	===
KHULNA	515,470	5,526	9	318	=	109	209	===
DAULATPUR	93,682	192	1	24	=	24	===	===
Khulna Sub-Division Total	1,301,264	13,181	106	1,831	32	1,503	319	9
KOLAROA	129,804	3,871	38	513	167	400	120	33
SATKHIRA	208,910	4,459	35	637	132	588	39	10
DEBHATA	66,585	1,232	10	176	73	176	===	===
KALIGONJ	171,167	1,568	14	224	49	199	===	25
SHIAMNAGAR	196,221	853	11	119	12	118	===	1
ASASUNI	185,356	3,129	31	447	37	345	102	===
TALA	185,810	9,926	38	1,418	72	1,310	90	18
SatkhiraSub-Division Total	1,143,953	25,038	177	3,574	542	3,136	351	87
TOTAL	2,445,217	38,219	283	5,405	574	4,639	670	96

THANA	RISHI Para	Para without land	Families without land	Families with 10+ bigs	Hindu Rishi Education			
					Para with no child at school	Rishi with S.S.C.	Rishi with I.A.	Rishi with B.A.
FULTOLA	6	===	===		1	5	==	==
DUMURIA	24	1	12	8	4	6	1	1
PAIKGACHA	35	21	145	5	25	1	==	==
DACOPE	19	10	65		14	==	==	==
BHATIAGATA	12	10	48		12	==	==	==
KHULNA	9	===	===		===	3	==	1
DAULATPUR	1	===	===		===	==	==	==
Khulna Sub-Division Total	106	42	270	13	56	15	1	2
KOLAROA	38	3	92	1	16	1	1	==
SATKHIRA	35	===	84	2	17	==	1	==
DEBHATA	10	2	25	==	5	==	==	==
KALIGONJ	14	2	26	2	8	==	==	==
SHIAMNAGAR	11	3	22	2 1fam. 90bg	9	==	==	==
ASASUNI	31	5	104	4	19	==	1	==
TALA	38	===	47	20	10	7	1	==
Satkhira Sub-Division Total	177	15	400	31	84	8	4	==
TOTAL	283	57	670	44	140	23	5	2

	Number of Families per Para							
	1-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-80	81-100	101-150
FULTOLA	4	2						
DUMURIA	3	10	4	2	1	4		1
PAIKGACHA	24	6	3	2				
DACOPE	12	4	2		1			
BHATIAGATA	11	1						
KHULNA		3	1	2	2		1	
DAULATPUR			1					
Khulna Sub-Division Total	54	26	11	6	4	4	1	1
KOLAROA	14	14	9	1				
SATKHIRA	15	8	5	6			1	
DEBHATA	4	3	1			1		
KALIGANJ	5	5	3	1				
SIAMNAGAR	7	2		2				
ASASUNI	14	12	3		1	1		
TALA	2	10	11	5	4	3	1	2
Satkhira Sub-Division Total	61	54	32	15	5	5	2	2
TOTAL	115	80	43	21	9	9	3	3
	40.63%	28.26%	15.19%	7.4%	3.18%	3.18%	1.06%	1.06%

TABLE 3

DUMURIA SURVEY 1987

UPOZILA POPUL.	URBAN POP.	Rishi *Paribar*			Children	LAND
		Total	Men	Women	under 15	
224,575*	11,077*	165	193	228	289	Only 13 *paribar* possess 85 *bighas*

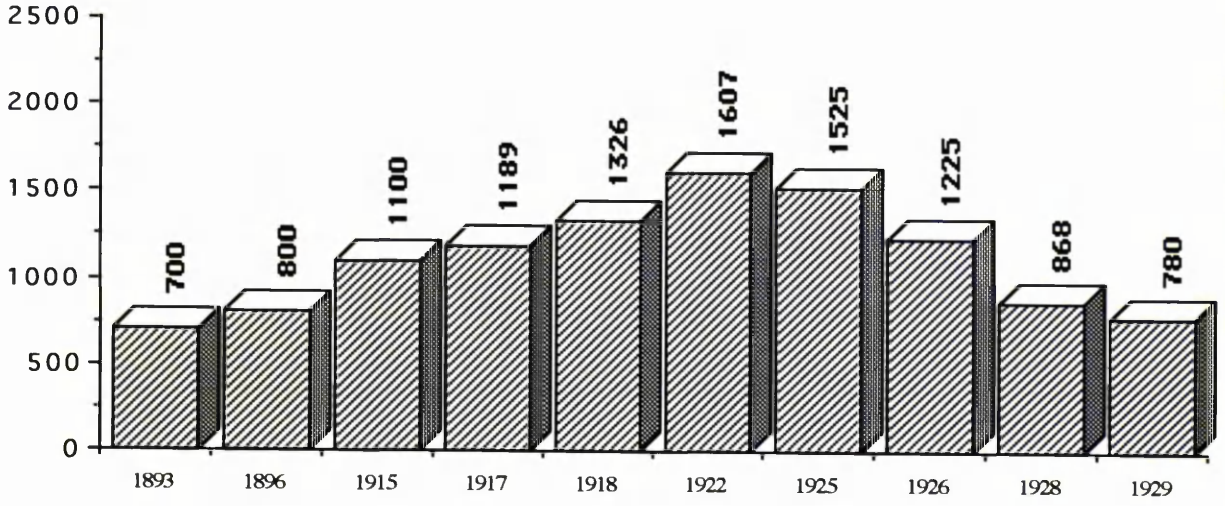
*1981 Census of Bangladesh

PARIBAR OCCUPATION and EARNINGS

OCCUPATION	No. of *Paribar*	Earnings p.c. per annum (Taka) min.	max.	Average Earnings (Taka)
Jota polis (shoeshiners)	51	1,600	3,000	2,320
Kuli (porters)	30	1,500	4,000	2,383
Cane/bet (rattan/cane workers)	28	1,400	4,000	2,187.5
Camra kata (skinners)	9	1,700	3,500	2,500.22
Camra begsa (skin dealers)	7	2,500	9,300	4,330
Mill coal jhara (rice mill workers)	9	1,250	2,000	1,566
Cakuri (wage earners) high	2	10,000	11,500	10,750
middle	2	7,000	9,000	8,000
low	3	2,400	2,500	2,433.3
Din mojuri (daily labourers)	4	1,200	2,500	1,925
Bhyan rekak ('van' drivers)	4	2,000		2,000
Begsa (commerce)	3	2,400	4,000	3,133
Mucci (cobblers)	3	2,000	5,000	3,335
Jutar dokan (shoeshop keepers)	4	2,000	2,500	2,300
Khet mojur (farmer)	1	2,200		2,200
Dhol tabla (drum makers)	2	2,500		2,500
Bhikkha (beggers)	3	1,000		1,000

TABLE 4

Simulia Catholics 1893-1929



Simulia Catholics 1936-1952

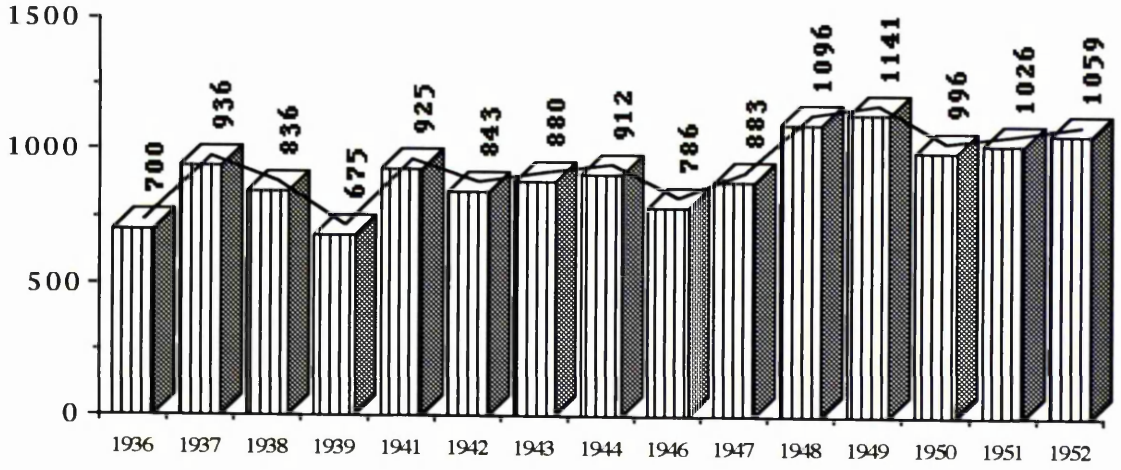


TABLE 5

Satkhira Catholics 1929-1952

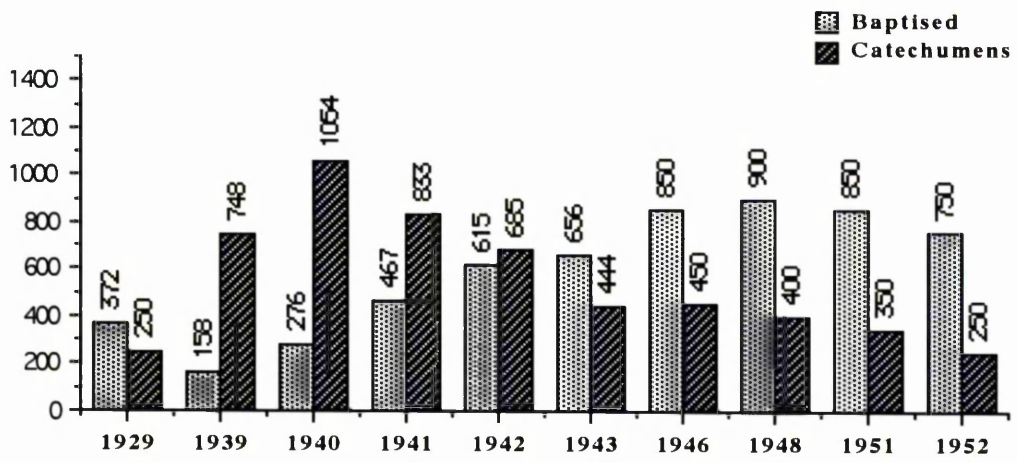
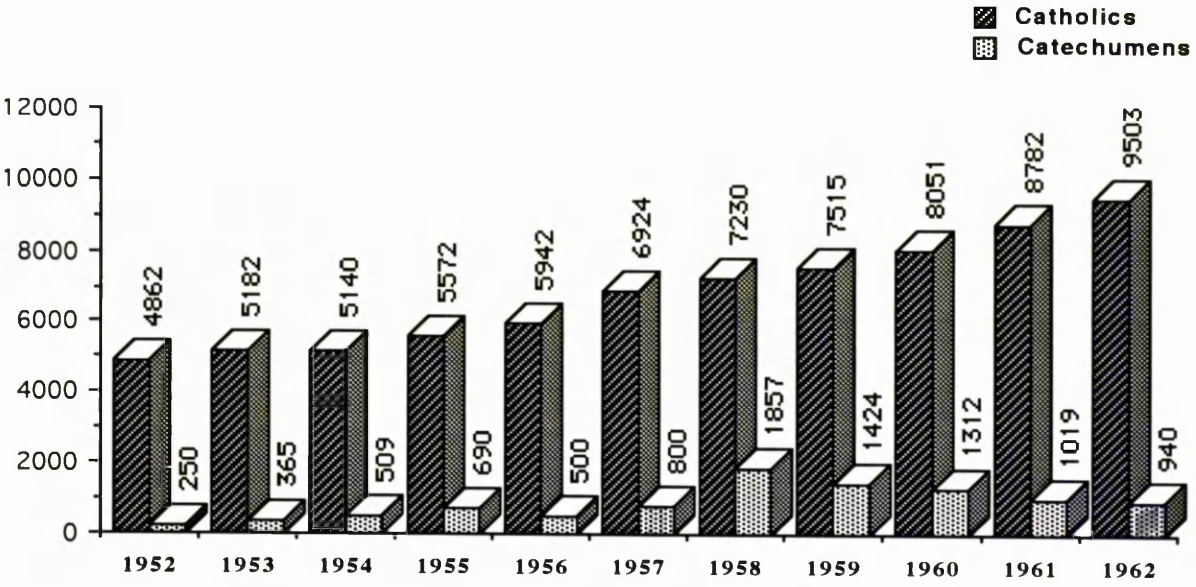
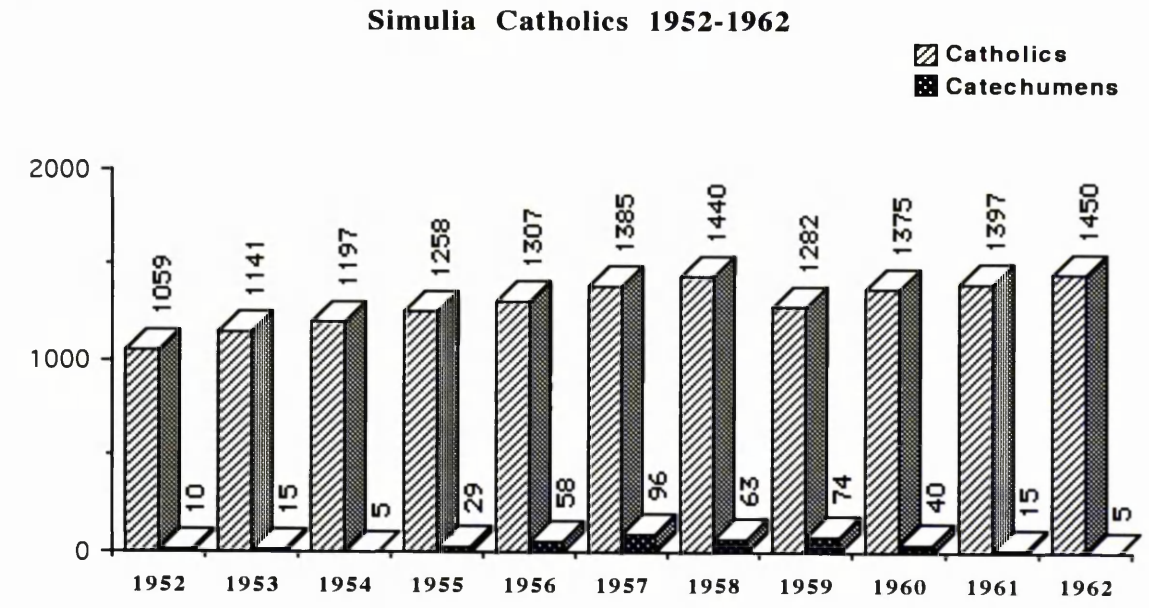


TABLE 6
A)

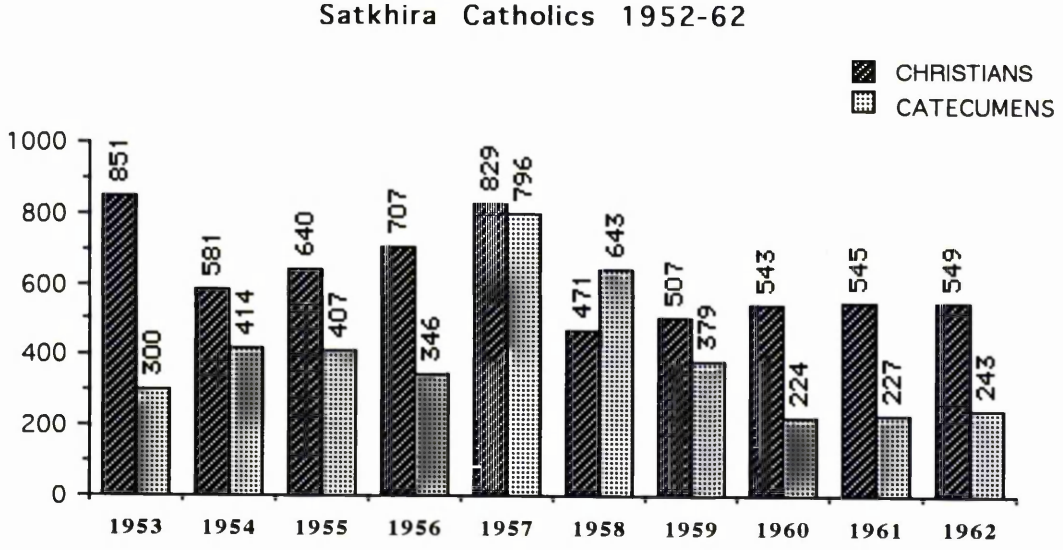
Catholics in Khulna Diocese 1952-1962



B)


Simulia Catholics 1952-1962
Catholics
Catechumens
2000
1000
0
1059
10
1141
15
1197
5
1258
29
1307
58
1385
96
1440
63
1282
74
1375
40
1397
15
1450
5
1952
1953
1954
1955
1956
1957
1958
1959
1960
1961
1962

C)


Satkhira Catholics 1952-62
CHRISTIANS
CATECUMENS
1000
800
600
400
200
0
851
300
581
414
640
407
707
346
829
796
471
643
507
379
543
224
545
227
549
243
1953
1954
1955
1956
1957
1958
1959
1960
1961
1962

D)

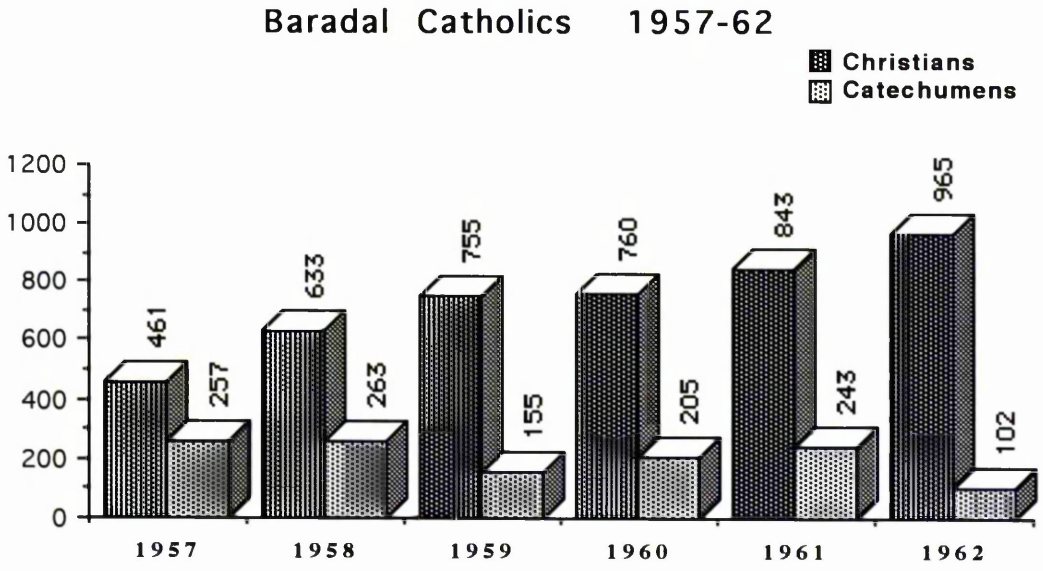
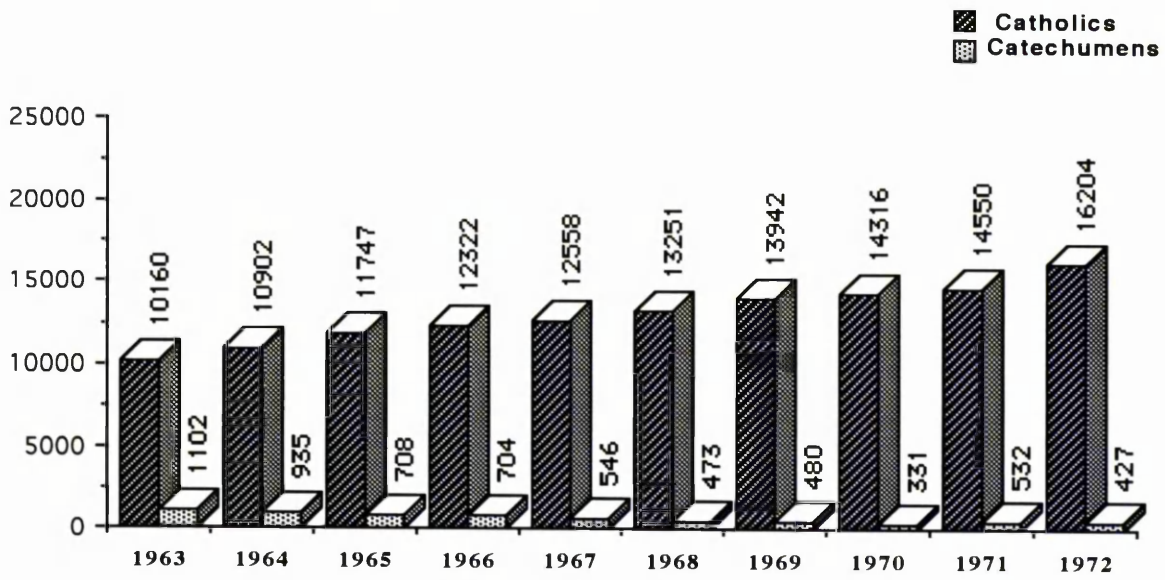
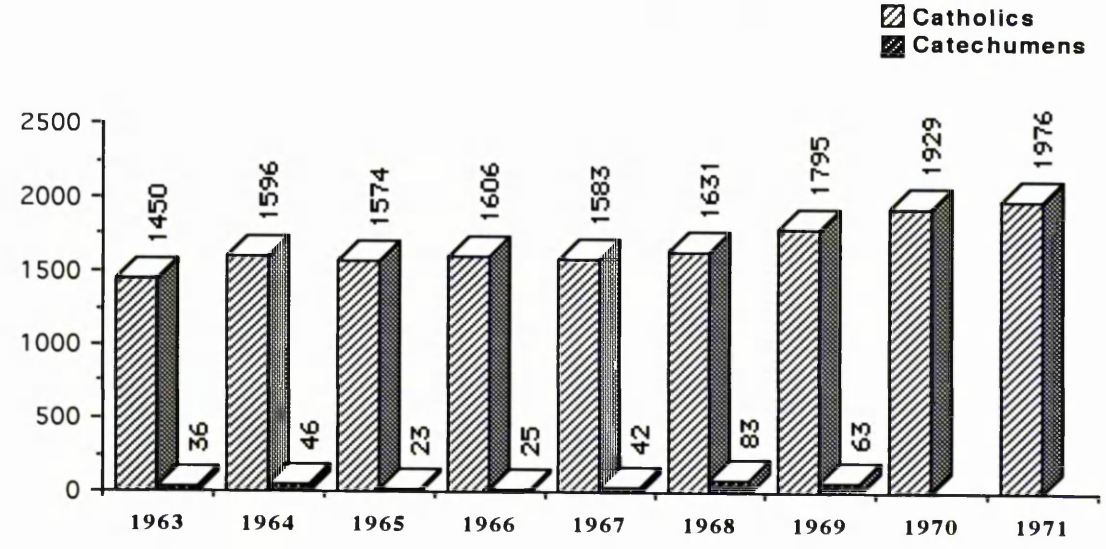

Baradal Catholics 1957-62
Christians
Catechumens
1200
1000
800
600
400
200
0
461
257
633
263
755
155
760
205
843
243
965
102
1957
1958
1959
1960
1961
1962

TABLE 7

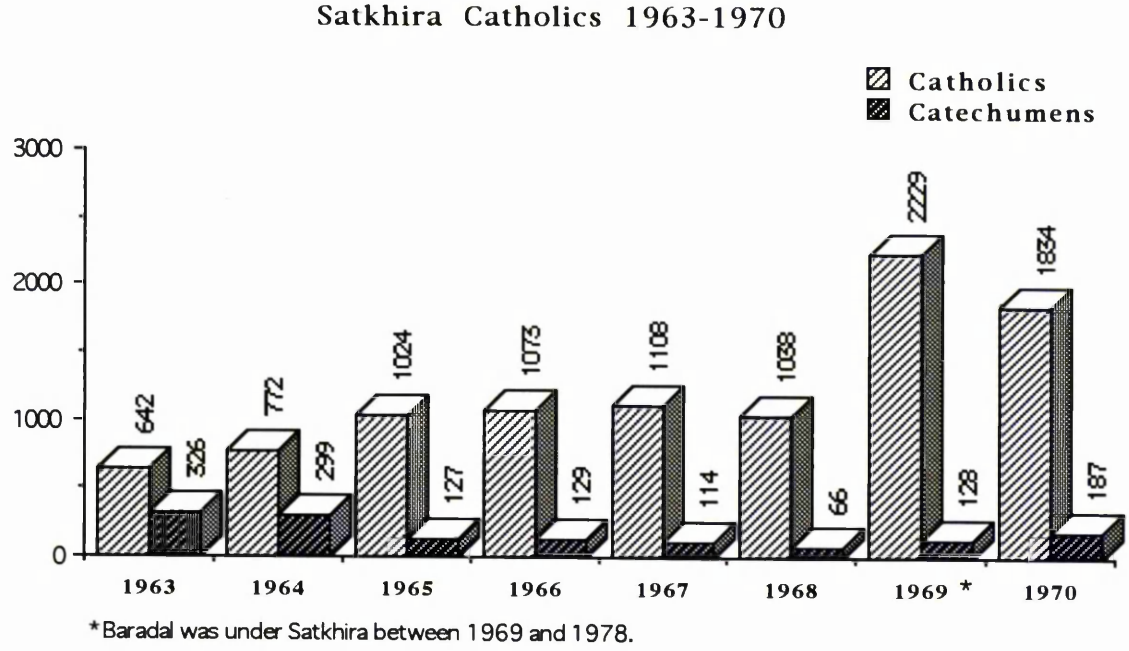
A)


Catholics in Khulna Diocese 1963-1972
Catholics
Catechumens
25000
20000
15000
10000
5000
0
10160
1102
10902
935
11747
708
12322
704
12558
546
13251
473
13942
480
14316
331
14550
532
16204
427
1963
1964
1965
1966
1967
1968
1969
1970
1971
1972

B)


Simulia Catholics 1963-1971
Catholics
Catechumens
2500
2000
1500
1000
500
0
1450
36
1596
46
1574
23
1606
25
1583
42
1631
83
1795
63
1929
1976
1963
1964
1965
1966
1967
1968
1969
1970
1971

C)



*Baradal was under Satkhira between 1969 and 1978.

D)

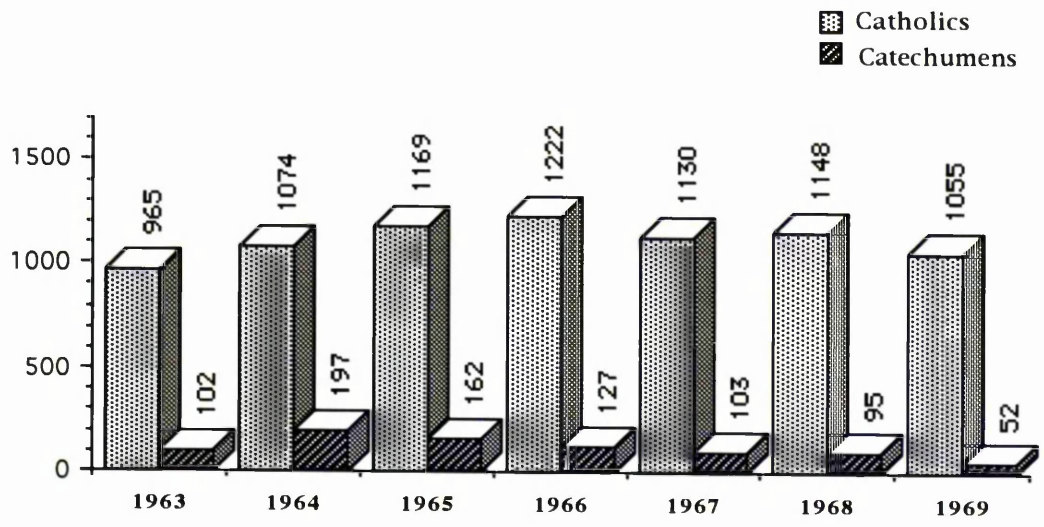
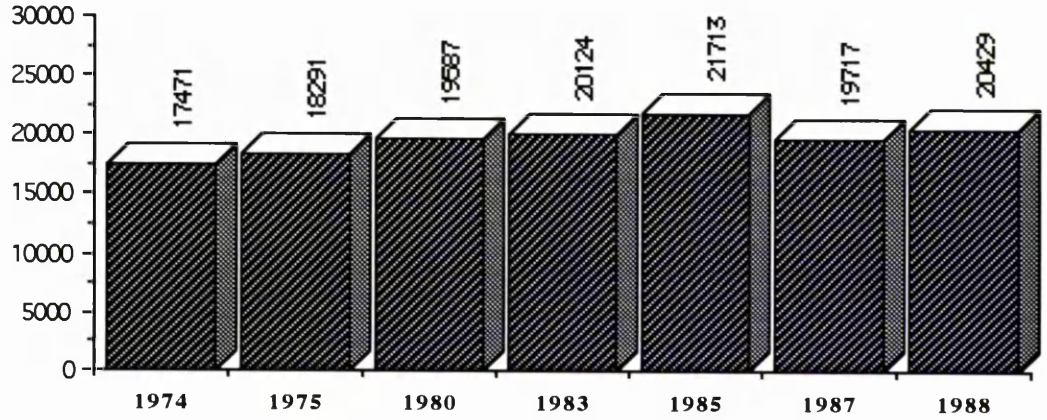


TABLE 8

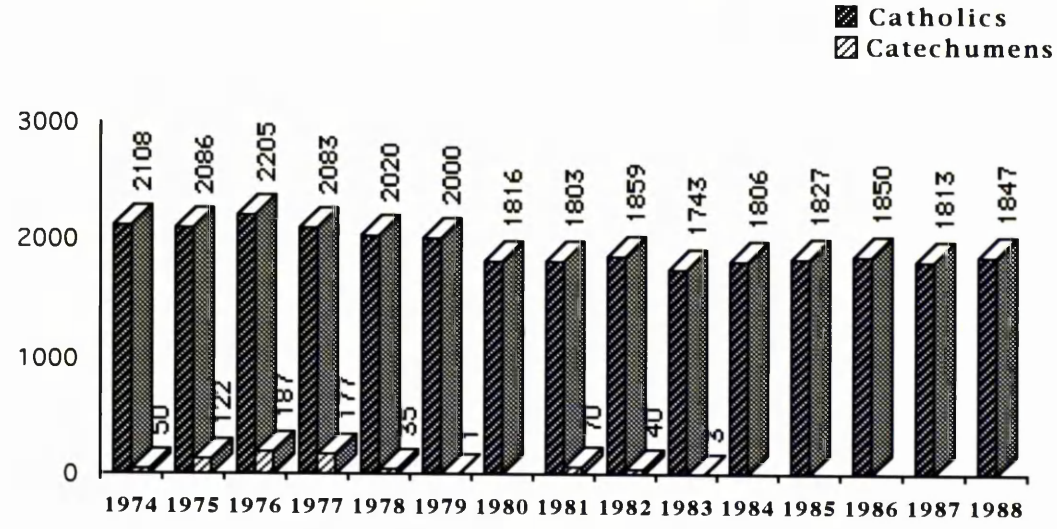
A)

KHULNA DIOCESE CATHOLICS 1974-1988

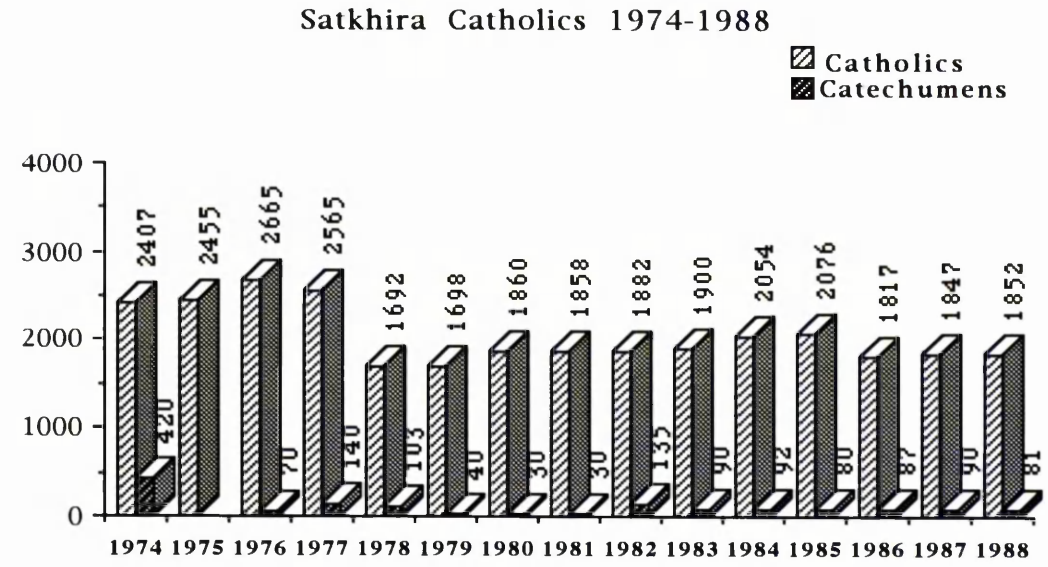


B)

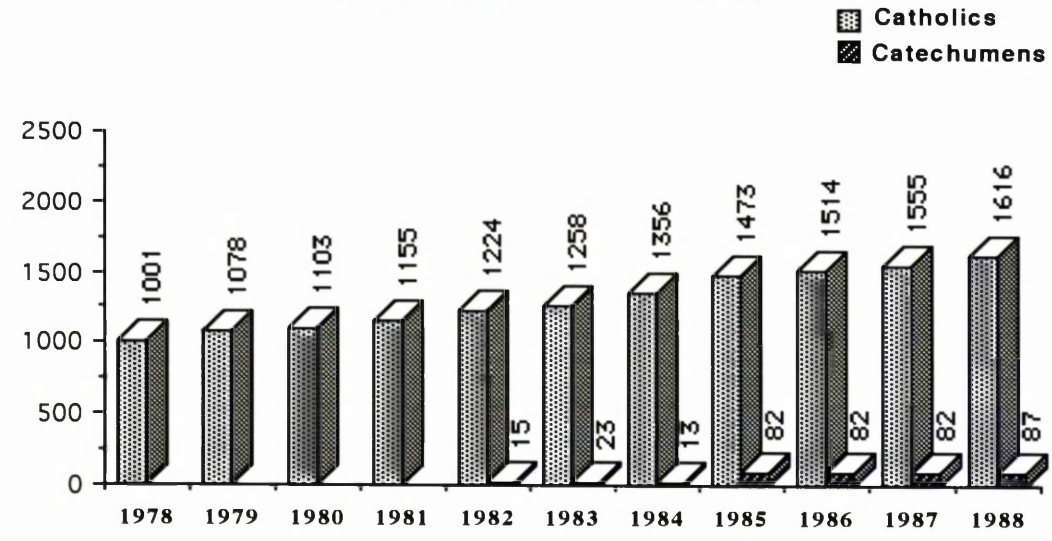
Simulia Catholics 1974-1988



C)


Satkhira Catholics 1974-1988
Catholics
Catechumens
4000
3000
2000
1000
0
2407
420
2455
2665
70
2565
140
1692
103
1698
40
1860
30
1858
30
1882
135
1900
90
2054
92
2076
80
1817
87
1847
90
1852
81
1974 1975 1976 1977 1978 1979 1980 1981 1982 1983 1984 1985 1986 1987 1988

D)


Baradal Catholics 1978-1988
Catholics
Catechumens
2500
2000
1500
1000
500
0
1001
1078
1103
1155
1224
15
1258
23
1356
13
1473
82
1514
82
1555
82
1616
87
1978 1979 1980 1981 1982 1983 1984 1985 1986 1987 1988

APPENDIX 1

About Colonialism, Orientalism, Subaltern Studies and Vernacular Christianity

The study of Christianity's association with colonialism and imperialism occupies a prominent place both in history and anthropology. The very definition of 'mission territory', apart from expressing the sharing of ideals with colonial powers which would annex 'new territories', symbolised the geographical expansion of Christianity.[1] History is filled with examples of colonisations that took place either in the form of pacific movements or of invasions. In both cases, there has always been an osmosis between cultures, an exchange of ideas and values, and often the ideas and values of the conquered people have not only resisted power but infiltrated the conquerors. Christianity, as the Judeo-Christian tradition of many countries which engaged in the colonial pursuit, has not escaped this fate. Furthermore, the divisions with which Christianity presented itself to other peoples showed, among other realities, not only a divided religion but also a divided Europe, united only by the thirst for power.

Though I recognise the importance of discussing socio-political and economic aspects of the expansion of Christianity in order to complete this composite mosaic, I concentrate here on one particular facet which has often been overlooked by anthropologists: this being the human dimension of the mission, resulting more from an exchange between two parties, than from their opposition. Highly spiritual as the message carried by the missionaries is supposed to be, it was a message carried by human beings to other human beings, a communication between people. The missionaries themselves, however confident of possessing a monopoly of the truth, were not immune from the continuous exposure to other peoples' life and culture. This osmosis generates, in the long run, a vitality which supersedes old divisions so that even the most stubborn and zealous missionaries came to recognise that they were not the sole depositories of 'salvation'. This position, which resulted largely from the internal insecurities of Christianity and the phenomenon of secularization, has certainly been furthered by the irruption of Otherness into Christianity. Lately we have witnessed a completion of the exchange which has passed from being one-sided - from the 'old Christianities' to the missions - to providing a feed-back from the missions to the communities at home, and this has brought about, in addition to a new way of re-interpreting Christianity, an open critique of political and economic powers as the cause of destabilisation in many countries where missionaries are operating.

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1 Sack (1986) demonstrates the use of power and strategy over territoriality to control people. Although in this instance I focus on communication rather than on power relations, his chapter discussing the uses of territoriality in the history of the Catholic Church is particularly illuminating on the subject. He lacks, however, a discussion on post-Vatican II policy on the issue.

While less-centralised Christian denominations found it easier to accommodate non-European cultures, Catholicism, given its highly sophisticated bureaucratic structure, has prolonged in its history the early tensions between the universality of the faith and the particular way of implementing Christianity in a given culture. Nevertheless, there are many instances in the history of Catholic missions which could easily prove the contrary: the Catholic communities in South America and the flourishing of a grassroots local theology during the past three decades is the most eloquent example. In Asia where Catholics are, together with other denominations, very much a minority, this phenomenon is less visible, even though Asia represented one of the first areas where Catholicism sought to find a new way of adaptation: the model for a local Christianity pioneered by Ricci in China and De Nobili in India depict outstanding examples of such an approach.

The history, however, of less famous and less publicised missions could provide a model for the study of this process which is still in progress today in South Asia. These 'humble' missions disclose in their evolution all the tensions and ambiguities of missionary ideology and discourse which were to result not only in a certain de-colonisation of the mission and, to some extent, of the local churches, but also in a different approach to Otherness. While missionary enterprise in Africa has been more commonly associated by anthropologists with 'colonialism', missions in India found a space in the debate on 'Orientalism': the result is, however, one and the same, since both Colonialism and Orientalism are two sides of the same coin.

Colonialism

A well-known study which associates missionary activity with colonialism in Africa, and to some extent in the rest of the world, is Beidelman's *Colonial Evangelism* (1982). Both in the preface and the conclusion of his study, the author reminds us of the periods of his fieldwork, which ended in 1965, and the many changes that have since taken place in his region. The historical material used in his work and added to the fieldwork data came mainly from missionary publications or archives. As he himself recognises, the data are "weak in precisely those areas where the historical material is best, the perspective of the European missionaries". This perspective, in his view, is adequately replaced by local informants, both within and outside the mission, and by his "own impressions as an outsider". While Beidelman "tried to be objective" in his presentation, and admitted a change in his own life, he is not prepared to grant the same possibility of change to the missionaries he 'observed'. His reading of historical records is not done to explore a possible shift in missionary attitude, but only to prove the persistence and the "arrogance" of colonialism: he condemns the missionaries using their own words, and judges the missionaries of his time according to much earlier writings. Furthermore, as he published in 1982 the results of fieldwork carried out in 1965, the missionaries remained caught in his anthropological present. In his conclusion, Beidelman makes reference to the profound changes that the colonised countries underwent after Independence, without recognising that a new situation had also developed in missionary activity, and although he conceded that, by 1980, anthropology had made

progress in assessing colonialism, he did not show himself ready to acknowledge the changes that meanwhile were taking place in the mission field as well. Beidelman justifies his position by affirming that "colonialism is not dead in Africa", being operated by a "privileged and powerful élite" who receive supervision from their predecessors. If this is the case - and I agree with him - he should also remind the reader that many missionaries have been expelled from Africa over the past three decades, precisely by this "powerful élite", whether in the government or church authority, who felt threatened by missionary attitudes towards their form of colonialism. In other words, reflexivity is not by any means a monopoly of anthropology and even though the terminology is different, there has been a great deal of self-criticism in missionary activity in Africa (cf. Bühlmann 1977; 1990).

In pointing out these lacunae, I do not intend to minimise the value of Beidelman's general statements. I want merely to consider his conclusions within a broader framework, where there is a place for those missionaries who are still attached to a colonial mentality, as well as for those who have been able to dissociate themselves from their past. He recognises, for instance that "a number of missionaries have published studies which have merit as histories and social analysis", but the merit is diminished and the results supposedly prejudiced, since "they were written from a Christian perspective" (Beidelman 1982: 7-8). The bias of the missionaries who attempted to write as historians and social scientists, without renouncing their religious belief, is not, in principle, any greater than Beidelman's own bias, if his claims to being objective are simply that he declares himself agnostic.

In his discussion of theoretical issues, Beidelman recognises the importance of taking into account the substantial differences which characterise missionary groups according to their "ethnicity, nationality, class and income". At the same time he criticises previous researchers for not exploring these distinctions. Could it be that both the previous researchers and Beidelman have fallen into the same trap of judging and analysing missionary activity only in relation to "patriotism and imperialistic sentiments"? The missionaries' link with their church of origin is surely much deeper than this, and the divisions between Protestants and Catholics cannot be easily dismissed as simple differences between two concepts of "a religious leader as priest or pastor". I certainly agree with him that "the issues involved are more than theological" and that "it is difficult to separate theological and organisational from economic factors when contrasting Protestants and Catholics", but this does not excuse Beidelman from contradicting himself: he cannot advocate the importance of differences on the one hand, and, on the other, go on to condemn all missionary activity as the same "cultural arrogance",[2] just because "imperialistic colonialism involves a sense of mission, of spreading a nation's vision of society and culture to an alien subjected people" (Beidelman 1982: 4). His

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2 Beidelman borrows this definition from Brown (1944:217).

pronouncements[3] ignore the fact that Christianity remains "framed in universal terms". The claim that "missionary activities might be expected to reflect similarities" more than differences and often oppositions, is the outcome of a mistaken judgement which does not take into account the history of the expansion of Christianity from its beginnings to the present - or at least Beidelman's present, and the history of particular missions. This history clearly demonstrates that it was not the desire to enslave peoples which pushed some into announcing this new religion and if, since the Edict of Constantine (313 A.D.) onwards,[4] Christianity has been used to promote the expansionist desires of 'Christian' heads of nations, it does not follow that all Christians and all missionaries were necessarily imperialists or supporters of colonialism. Even less it is right to exclude the possibility of change in mission policy (cf. Gray 1990: 80). No one doubts that Christianity was attached to colonialism or that each helped the other to realise their aims, but it is this difference in aims which is precisely what separates the two: while Christianity used power to affirm itself even in contravention of the fundamental principles which govern it, colonialism justifies itself first and foremost through the use of power. Moreover, the division of the two became marked with the separation within Europe of secular and religious powers. The phenomenon of secularization, which has in different ways touched the various Christian denominations, has also led to a different approach in colonial attitudes towards "colonised" countries. A striking example of this can be seen in the colonial legacy left by administrators and governments in non-European countries and in the position of some Christian communities in relation to current issues such as racism, intolerance, warfare, arms deals, etc. On the other hand, it is not difficult to unmask a sort of 'Evangelical Fundamentalism' supported by secular power with the intent of maintaining an oppressive *status quo* or destabilising potential revolutions, when these conflict with the policy of western governments. In this respect Beidelman fails to distinguish missionary activity, run by men and women who could not always escape the temptation to affirm themselves rather than the message they preached, from the content of this message, with the result that he simply identifies mission with colonialism.

Beidelman himself acknowledges that he did not attempt to place his study "within the broader context of theology and church history" (Beidelman 1982: XVII), since he is concerned with social anthropology and colonial history. This need not, however, have prevented him from taking into account the developing ideas, beliefs and values, according to which the missionaries directed their

---

3 " Christian missions represent the most naive and ethnocentric and therefore the most thorough-going, facet of colonial life. ..... Missionaries invariably aimed at overall changes in the beliefs and actions of native peoples, at colonization of heart and mind as well as body. Pursuing this sustained policy of change, missionaries demonstrated a more radical and morally intense commitment to rule than political administrators or business men" (Beidelman 1982: :5-6).

4 " Recently it has become common to bracket the phase in question under the heading of 'the Constantinian era'. This is understood as the era since the transition in the fourth century A.D. - transition from a time when the Church was an outcast or at least an outsider to a time when it was 'established' as one of the pillars of society. This way of thinking implies that ecclesiastical social conservativism may indeed be inseparably linked with a situation in which the Church has a stake in the social status quo. But it also implies that such a situation is not the only one for the Church to be in, and that it may prove to have been quite exceptional when looked back on from a point in the more distant future" (Digan 1984: 2).

concrete day-to-day activity in the field. Furthermore, by not recognising the evolutionary aspect of beliefs and values he runs the risk of presenting a fixed, immutable reality, which cannot give a faithful picture of the mission. His plea for a grass-roots approach to the mission cannot be achieved without knowing and testing the beliefs and values at work in the field, nor simply by assuming the missionaries' beliefs to be destructive of other people's beliefs and values. In addition to this, "he seems quite unaware of the ability of the Kaguru, and other Africans, to distinguish between Christianity and the missionaries" (Gray 1983: 406).

Two other major points discussed by Beidelman deserve our attention: the first is concerned with the similarity between the Europeans who "presented colonialism as a caretaking operation which would last only until Africans had sufficient experience for self-government" and the missionaries who "described themselves as serving only until an African church would be strong enough to run itself" (Beidelman 1982: 21). Many missionaries belonging to several Christian denominations not only admitted their error and felt "self-conscious about the neocolonial implications of missionary activities", as Beidelman himself has pointed out - recognising at least in this case a possibility of change- but voluntarily retired to more humble jobs in the mission field, often acting as the critical conscience of Christianity by denouncing the injustice and corruption of the heirs of colonial administration. The recent history of the missions and of Christian communities in Africa, which manifested, after Independence, ethnic and inter-confessional divisions, reveal a Christianity in growth towards maturity where contradictions and ambiguities become an essential part of that growing process. Ambiguity is at the basis of the Christian message itself: Christ remains and cannot escape from being a sign of ambiguity in the history of humankind, since announcing a God who becomes man is essentially ambiguous and those who believe in him cannot but reproduce the ambiguity inherent in the message they preach.[5]

Secondly, in introducing the phenomenon of secularization in Europe and North America in relation to missionary activity, Beidelman rightly contrasts the missionaries' "grieving over the loss of religious pervasivennes at home", with the way they 'destroyed' the beliefs of traditional African societies where "religion remained an essential part of everyday affairs".[6] But by the time Beidelman began writing, there was enough evidence to acknowledge not only the positive influence of 'secularization' in the mission field, which resulted in a greater open-mindedness towards the beliefs and values of the missionised, but also the strong critical standpoint taken by the missionaries towards their own governments, held responsible for many situations of injustice and warfare in former

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5 The idea of ambiguous 'sign' is derived from Christian theology itself: the Latin expression '*sacramentum*' translates the Greek idea of '*mysterion*', which expresses the image of both a revealing and a hiding 'sign'.

6 " The most poignant and destructive aspect of evangelism in Africa was the missionaries failure either to appreciate fully the integrated quality of traditional African life or to appraise realistically the discordant bases of their own societies" (Beidelman 1982: 25).

colonies. The outcome of this critique resulted in the death or expulsion of many North American and European missionaries from African and especially from South American countries.

In sum, while it can be recognised that missions and colonial powers at some stage went hand in hand, each pursuing its own ends, we witness lately a strong divide between the two: Neo-colonialism still needs to affirm itself by the use of oppression and power, while some within Christianity are re-discovering the fundamental principles of encounter and dialogue which were at the roots of the first centuries of its expansion.

Karp, (1984: 215-16) highlighting Beidelman's methodological basis through a Weberian analysis of ideal types, stresses the shortcomings of the missionaries and their inevitable failure, endorsing thus the 'ironic' mode used by Beidelman as the only possible way to illuminate this 'utopian' enterprise. Irony is certainly useful in emphasising the 'disappointing secularism' towards which the missionised moved, imitating the 'materialistic' society the missionaries left behind. However, the utopian dimension or 'the inevitable failure to achieve ideals', which can only partially explain the use of an ironic mode, fails to provide an explanation of the authors' understanding of utopianism. Utopia is by no means a prerogative of missionary activity or Christianity in general, but has inspired many movements and revolutions throughout history. Neither Karp nor Beidelman - or Weber for that matter- seem able to supply a satisfactory answer to utopia and ideals when these become an important part of the life of individuals and communities and are able to give sense to and to transform their lives and their history.

In a more recent study of Catholic missionaries in New Guinea, Huber (1988) adopts the ironic style of Beidelman not only as a stylistic feature but as an anthropological theory through which missionary activity can be interpreted. Applying the 'ironic self-representation' present in missionary texts to the situation in the Sepik region, she forgets that "irony, both as a style of anthropological writing and as a form of self-representation by missionaries, is itself part of the problem and should be analysed by relating the ironic texts to the process of their production" (Pels 1990: 109). Indeed, Huber could have given the same account of missionaries without involving the people to whom the missionary activity was directed. The interaction between missionaries and native inhabitants is missing in her account, this resulting in the radical incompatibility of two different worlds, "separated by social and cultural distance". As a result, "Huber's approach prevents her from looking for occasions where missionary and native share the same place, time and activities" (Pels 1990: 110). In this way she not only falls into the trap of adopting an anthropological style (irony) as 'theoretical currency', but fails to discuss adequately the encounter between missionary and Papuan, presenting a severely mutilated version of events.

Orientalism

My first purpose here is not to assess the intuition and insights of Said's *Orientalism* (1978), but rather to contest his way of proceeding, his epistemology, which not only leads to 'distortion and inaccuracy', but also risks causing a divide greater than that which he seeks to avoid. Secondly, it will be argued that Said's critique of the 'Western self', which creates and defines the 'other', is insufficient in order to move towards a 'self' subjected to the 'other', and that the 'self' postulated by him is no different from the 'self' which promoted Orientalism and Colonialism, and is thus unable to assume an ethical position and responsibility in front of the 'Other'. Either the 'self' is prepared to recognise this asymmetrical attitude of ethics, or it will always try to prove the inferiority of a defined 'other'.

I will then move to *Subaltern Studies* as a possible application and response to Said's attack, before finally arguing that 'resistance to élite historiography' can express itself in different ways, not least in the way it originates from a different implementation of Christianity, mainly, but not only, in those areas where Christianity accompanied the expansion of colonialism. Gramsci's political theory of hegemony and counter-hegemony represents the ideal arena where this 'Vernacular Christianity' can be analysed as developing conditions which promote either quiescence or resistance.

If it is true that Said, in accusing western Orientalism, based his critique on the works of Foucault and Gramsci, this means that the European Self has kept within itself the opportunity for self-criticism. In a way, even Said cannot but embark on a dialogue, though difficult and tormented, with his Other. It is the "possibility for dialogue" which most interests me, or "the question about the possibility of the question", as Derrida understands Gadamerian hermeneutics of dialogue: "the question of the possibility of surpassing the metaphysics of presence..... a question of something entirely other" (Michelfelder-Palmer 1989: 8-9). This stance is positioned somewhere between Gadamer's preoccupation with the symmetry of dialogue and the ontological foundation of language, and Levinas's interest in an asymmetrical dialogue, founded on the ethics preceding every ontology. It is this which allows us to bring into our "dialogue" the critical perceptions of Derrida, Foucault and, to some extent, Gramsci. Indeed, for Levinas as well as for the latter, metaphysics are put into question, the epistemological power of the Self is undermined, its capacity to acquire knowledge derived from reason is contested, and its truth claims based on this knowledge are invalidated. In this sense, my attempt is to apply Levinas's essentialism to an empirical context in a search for a dialectical "hermeneutically informed social theory".[7]

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7 Giddens proposes the use of a "double hermeneutic" in social theory, since "social theory cannot be insulated from its 'object world' ... It is the hinge connecting to possible modes in which the social sciences connect to their involvement in society itself: as contributing to forms of exploitative domination, or as promoting emancipation" (Giddens 1984:228).

Said's preoccupation with eliminating the "we (Westerners) and they (Orientals)" division, prevents him from leaving the realm of ontology and symmetry and hence not only is the possibility of encounter between the Self and the Other negated, but also the Otherness of the other is either nullified, being absorbed by the Self, or defined as abnormal and thus controlled by the Self. Every kind of imperialism will proceed along a line of 'normalisation' of the other, within which other people will be classified as 'different' and treated accordingly. It is this 'unavoidable ontological distinction between self and other' (Pinney, 1989: 145), not clarified by Said, which has direct consequences both for anthropology and missionary activity. Failing to resolve this problem, Said is left either with the impossibility of 'dialogue' and encounter, or with an unjustified absorption, domestication and 'normalisation' of the other. Despite his claim that he is not creating 'Occidentalism' as an answer to 'Orientalism',[8] it is difficult to believe that the promotion of 'human community' will be better carried out by ignoring "racial, ethnic, and national distinctions", without these being clarified. The problematic relationship between the Self and the Other cannot be resolved by the theoretical or practical elimination of the 'Other', but by an altogether different approach which sees the 'event of subjectivity' as the "exposure and subjection to the Other". It is the Levinasian 'chiasmus' "the one-for-the-other" (Levinas 1991: 7).

The argument *ad hominem* expressed by Said in his preface ("the East is a career"), according to which the Orientalist earned a living by writing about others and representing them, can be easily made against Said himself: his representations and generalisations of a unitary Western culture are no less false than those denounced by him. This argument can be further expanded if we consider that while Said repudiates "Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1978: 3), he finds within this very European culture the tools to counter-attack Orientalism. It is precisely in the works of Foucault and Gramsci, where Said's main thesis finds support, that we can see the division not only within Europe between Self and Other, but also the distinction between a normal self and abnormal others within different European 'cultures'. Despite recognising that European culture was "hegemonic both in and outside Europe", Said seems to miss the point when he derives this hegemony from the idea of European superiority over non-Europeans. It is very difficult to imagine "an average nineteenth century European" united to other Europeans by a single culture, as it is difficult to conceive a Catholic/Protestant ecumenism based on their being European. Had he remained faithful to both Foucault's and Gramsci's 'critical elaboration', Said would have better understood the connection between the development of a dominating self within Western 'cultures', and its role of domination outside Europe. Furthermore, the 'inventory' proposed by Gramsci is certainly "imperative at the outset" (Said 1978: 25) to achieve a consciousness which is only "the starting-point of critical elaboration", but it should be remembered that for Gramsci " 'one's

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8 " Above all, I hope to have shown my reader that the answer to orientalism is not Occidentalism" (Said 1978: 328).

real nature' is determined by the struggle to become what one wants to become", (Gramsci 1985: 145) with all the utopian implications this entails both for Self and Other.

The theoretical and sometimes rhetorical questions formulated by Said at the end of his study are of great relevance for our discussion: "How does one represent other cultures? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilization) a useful one.....? Do cultural, religious and racial differences matter more than socio-economic categories, or politicohistorical ones?" (Said 1978: 325). Some of the 'implicit answers' proposed by Said, given his suggested elimination of Otherness, go against himself, and his 'representation' of Europe is no less a representation than Orientalism.

Said's Orientalism remains incomplete not only because his 'inventory' is incomplete, but also because he does not recognise the Other in his Otherness. When the Other is made equal to, or the same as the Self, he is "de-fined"[9] more than represented and thus nullified, since I negate him the right to exist outside of myself. I certainly accept with Foucault and Said that 'knowledge' about the Other can be used against him, to control, dominate and nullify him. I can also appreciate that there are different levels of 'intentionality' in the use of this knowledge and that different levels of encounter-dialogue between the Self and the Other can be established.

Even though "the theoretical issues raised by Orientalism as a case study of a cultural discourse cannot be disposed of.... by means of any simple contrast between experience and textuality" (Clifford 1988: 258), we can still contrast different experiences which have produced quite different textualities. In the history of missionary activity, for instance, it was the idea of 'salvation' which motivated the missionaries to leave their country and to proclaim a 'new religion' to others. The missionaries held so many prejudices against other religions that the initial desire to 'know' was very limited indeed. Convinced as they were of possessing the whole truth, the knowledge of other religions was, most of the time, either considered a waste of time or a point of departure to prove the supreme validity of Christianity. It has been through continuous interaction with the Other that in South-West Bangladesh missionaries and mission theology are re-discovering their 'subjected subjectivity'. After days, after years, after centuries, late but maybe not too late, they are realising that 'salvation' does not come from the Self, but from the Other, the one 'beyond being or otherwise than being'. 'Knowledge' is thus replaced by encounter and 'dialogue', and the Other is not imprisoned or transformed by the Self into 'same', not represented or 'de-fined', but invoked. At this point, the Self too is not afraid of exposing itself, of making itself 'known' to the Other.

This reading of events with its possibility of a changing attitude of the Self towards the Other is not contemplated in Said's vision of reality, and the temporality which was denied to the Other by the

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9 'De-finire' (Latin) is, in this sense, not specifying qualities but 'putting an end'.

Self, (cf. Fabian 1983) is now denied to an unchanging, static and unified Self. For this very reason, Said cannot but classify even Massignon[10] among those who have a "will to knowledge over the Orient", and when he praises him for standing above cultural particularism, Said does not perceive that this sort of universalist humanity "is a privilege invented by a totalizing Western liberalism" (Clifford 1988: 263).

I would suggest that Said is in need of a more radical approach to the Self-Other relationship than his acquired security of a Self which is always tempted to assimilate 'Otherness' into 'sameness'. What I have traced is the irruption of an asymmetrical relationship where "I am not only more responsible than the other but I am even responsible for everyone else's responsibility" (Levinas-Kearney 1986: 31). This suggests that anthropology is not always doomed to proclaim itself as a science of knowledge and understanding oriented towards the acceptance of a normalised unitary human nature, or as the defender of conquered truths, for

> against a notion of the truth as the instrument of a mastery being exercised by the knower are areas of the unknown as he or she brings them into the fold of the same..... There is a form of truth that is totally alien to me, that I do not discover within myself, but that calls me from beyond me, and it requires me to leave the realms of the known and the same in order to settle in a land that is under its rule.[11]

Subaltern Studies

'Orientalism in its Indological branch' has been reintroduced by Inden (1986) and although I share the profound reasons which form the basis of his critique, I find it more difficult to support the systematic foundation upon which the critique rests. Inden in his analysis follows, in the main, one of Said's definitions of *Orientalism,* which is 'Orientalism' as "Academic Tradition" and as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident' " (Said 1978: 2). Strangely enough the 'human community' hoped for by Said, or the elimination of the we-they distinction, becomes for Inden the basic critique of Indology.[12]

Following both Foucault's idea of representation and Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony', and introducing the interpretation of dreams in Freudian psychoanalysis, Inden argues that both the 'positivist/empirical realist' and the 'romantic' "have a similar interest in sustaining the Otherness of

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10 "Said's discussion of Massignon, the most interesting in his book, is a crucial test case for Orientalism.... Here Said can no longer generalize sweepingly and categorically about 'the Orientalist' and 'Orientalism' " (Clifford 1988: 262).

11 Godzich 1986:xvi.

12 " Two of the assumptions built into the 'episteme' of Indology are that the real world (whether that is material and determinate or ideal and ineffable) consists of essences and that the world is unitary. Entailed in these two assumptions is a further assumption. It holds that there exists a 'human nature' which itself consists of a unitary essence" (Inden 1986: 402).

India" (Inden 1986: 442). The analysis of this 'otherness' further contains a number of presuppositions: 1) relationship between knower and known where a fundamental dualism of knowledge and reality vitiates the relationship; 2) ontological unity where a single human nature represents reality. Rejecting "the reality of knower and known presupposed by this episteme" (Ibid.: 444), Inden wishes "... to produce a world that is more egalitarian and multi-centered", and, at the same time "to transform our intellectual practices so as to make them more egalitarian and multi-centered" (Ibid.: 445). This task is again related to reality since we are invited not only "to change our 'attitudes' ", but also "our concept of knowledge and the power over India that it creates".

Apart from the reductive concept of Europe and the West present in both Said and Inden, it seems that Inden does not find a solution to the impasse in which Hegel's predicament left Indology and all the human sciences related to it. Furthermore, if Inden advocates an approach different from a 'unitary human nature', 'otherness' is called into play. This 'otherness' does not entail polar opposition between East and West, - a recognition for which Inden praises Hocart[13] - but asymmetry, where the other is not dominated by knowledge and truth claims, and the self aspires to something different and beyond 'egalitarianism'. To make the other 'equal' is at the level of 'justice' ("which is a calculation, which is knowledge"- Levinas 1988: 171), a figment which reduces him to the same, thus destroying him. The responsibility of the self, advocated also by Said and implied by Inden, must be understood as an ethical priority, prior to the ontology of justice and egalitarianism.

Among the authors praised by Inden for "reappropriating the capacity to represent themselves" figure those who initiated *Subaltern Studies*. This new trend of Indian historiography is taken up here in order not only to clarify Inden's (1990) own position, in respect of the subject-agent,[14] but also to understand how far *Subaltern Studies*, given their task of recovering 'the specific and distinctive histories of the masses' and "the subaltern as a conscious human subject-agent", slips "into a metaphysics of presence" (O'Hanlon 1988: 197). Indeed, this seems to be the preoccupation of O'Hanlon in her review of the first four volumes of *Subaltern Studies*, which assesses the 'strategy' adopted by many of its contributors and in particular by its editor, Ranajit Guha.

O'Hanlon has suggested that we pay closer attention to "the subaltern's fundamental otherness, which may render his consciousness of the political in forms alien or even antipathetic to us" (Ibid.: 223). Approaching this 'otherness' from the point of view of the self as described by Levinas, I argue that the subaltern "will be restored to history" in a way different from that proposed by the Subaltern

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13 " Where Hocart departs from other Orientalists is in his refusal to subscribe to the metaphysics which constructs a West and a East that are polar opposites" (Ibid.: 436).

14 "... Inden argues, historical communities ought to be seen as polities constructed by human agency. This agency may be individual or composite, unified or dispersed..... But in all cases, the boundaries between groups and institutions must be represented as being transacted, contested and constantly reformulated" (Bayly, C.A., 'Elusive Essences', *Time Literary Supplement*, 7-13 December 1990: 1313).

project and closer to a Gramscian position, which we would have expected to be central to such a project. In this way, we can take O'Hanlon's suggestion a little further in order "to recover the presence of the subordinate without slipping into an essentialism" subverting thus "the self-constituting subject of idealism" (Ibid.: 203).

The main problem within the Subaltern project, according to O'Hanlon, is that in wanting to recover the 'histories of the subordinate' from the oblivion in which they were left by 'dominant historiography', the contributors, generally speaking, slip into (or are tempted into) imposing an identity on the subaltern (that of the "virile figure of the subject-agent") which contains in itself "the temptation to appropriate the categories of dominant discourse" (Ibid.: 210). The restoration of subjectivity, motivated by the urge to reinstate the subaltern 'as a subject of history', is in need of being supported, as Guha indeed does, by a clear Hegelian ideology, the very same which was criticised by Inden as a source of Indian Orientalism. The autonomous subject-agent, a self-constituting, self-determining individual, as found in the discourse of liberal humanism and proposed as a 'universal' with ideals of liberty from which the dispossessed are excluded, is the model presented by the Subaltern project to end dispossession. This is, however, also the model which caused dispossession in the first place in Europe, and which has been denounced as such by Foucault and others.

The dichotomy between the 'élite', with its domination through hegemonic appropriation of power, and the 'subaltern' in search of autonomy, cannot then be bridged by reducing the 'otherness' of the subaltern to the 'sameness' of the self. In other words, the self-agent proposed by the Subaltern project to be adopted by the subordinate others is no different from the self of the coloniser, who, to be sure, also tended to ascribe identities, to de-fine the 'other', and to draw him into the realm of 'sameness'. Is the idea of the subaltern subject-agent the best way to present 'resistance' to the élite's 'power'?[15]

The position I advocate, apart from a difference in lexical expression, resembles very closely Levinas's distinction of the ' Saying and the Said' , and as such, it contains the same tension, which O'Hanlon terms a 'contradiction'. Dismissing the contributors' claim that a political project implies "that our efforts can be co-terminous with the struggles of the dispossessed", and concluding that "our political concern is thus differently constructed from that of the subaltern", she moves on to explain the 'tension' inherent in her position:

> It is the contradiction, containing a conceit of the profession which is very difficult to escape, which means that our desire to find a resistant presence will always be in tension, rather than as we might think convergent with, the need to preserve alienness and difference in the figure of the subaltern himself (O'Hanlon 1988: 219).

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15 "Our question, therefore, must in part be what kind of presence, what kind of practice, we would be justified in calling a resistant one: what is the best figure for us to cast it in, which will both reflect its fundamental alienness, and yet present it in a form which shows some part of that presence at least to stand outside and momentarily to escape the constructions of dominant discourse" (O'Hanlon 1988: 219).

In Levinasian terms, this tension is explained by the necessity to approach the alterity of the other with the 'passivity' of the self, which is not indifference, but, on the contrary, which provokes 'watchfulness' and responsibility, because the face of the dispossessed in front of us demands a response which cannot be postponed. This is what O'Hanlon calls "a scrupulous respect for this tension" - a respect "which will keep our practice from slipping into ..... the obsessive demand of our political culture: from making the subaltern's voice heard, but construing it in the image of our own" (O'Hanlon 1988:219).

By restoring the subaltern as a conscious human subject 'in the classic manner of liberal humanism', not only do we subscribe to humanism's central myth (Ibid.: 197), but we impose on the subaltern a self which prolongs the same hegemonic attitudes characteristic of humanism. Thus Majid Siddiqui asks "how the possibility of subordinate groups being exploiters in one context, and exploited in another, can be consonant with any idea of genuine autonomy" (Ibid.: 203). Furthermore, when the identity of the subaltern has been constructed as a 'negation of the signs of élite authority', this identity is "mediated through symbols and signs which were external to it, those of élite authority" (Ibid.: 204). The self which is approved, produced, controlled and imposed on the colonised by the coloniser "as the sole area of public legitimate reality", is by no means the only alternative possible for the subaltern. We thus witness a variety of identifications revealed for instance by the situation of the "subordinate within the ranks of the colonised". Some groups did not reach self-consciousness only through the negation of the signs of élite authority but by imposing their superiority on other groups lower in the hierarchy. Not only then does 'negation' take the double form of destroying or appropriating the signs of the authority, but it is also expressed as 'negativity in action', in the desire of the subordinate to stand in two places at once "and 'keeping his place in the slave's avenging anger', to witness himself triumphant" (Ibid.: 205).

What is important here is to note that when homogeneity and consensus, derived from the 'collective tradition and cultures' and the shared values of the subordinate, are made a central part in the treatment of resistance to power, the result will unavoidably be strategic weakness. Even though we search for 'regularities of practice' or for the attempt by the subordinate to bring order and coherence into existence, "we should not forget that such order can only ever represent the contingent and temporary creation of this practice, a creation capable of being turned to effect in repressive ways within their numbers, as well as of conducing to their mutual understanding and solidarity" (Ibid.: 212). Only in this way can we explain the double burden of untouchability imposed on untouchable women, or the exploitation of prostitution and child labour among subordinate groups.

Returning to our main concern, that of preserving the otherness of the dispossessed, the discussion must proceed from the point of a self, that of the coloniser, the élite historiographer, the Orientalist, the anthropologist, who stands in front of the dispossessed and, before the latter can open his mouth, the former receive the command "Thou shalt not kill".

If I could imagine, and only imagine, what the 'other', the dispossessed can see in the face of this self, I would describe it as shame, fear, and a plea for forgiveness. Will this self imploring forgiveness become a source for the other's self? This is not for the self to answer, it is out of the realm of its responsibility for to be preoccupied with this would mean being intent on imposing an identity on the other, to define him. My responsibility, however, goes as far as presenting myself as hostage to the other and "nobody can replace me in this service, which constitutes me as this unique individual".

> Subjectivity as the relation of the-one-for-the-other interrupts and forbids the absolutization of a narcissistic way of life prompted by the spontaneous drive of an isolated ego..... This is the reason why being-offered-to-the-other implies pain and suffering.....(Paperzak 1991: 62).

This self is not the 'virile figure' proposed by the Subaltern project, which "bears all the marks of dominant discourse, in its insistence that resistance itself should necessarily take a virile form of a deliberate and violent onslaught" (O'Hanlon 1988: 223). We should call to mind that for Gramsci "each form of the hegemonic comes into existence around diversities of interest and potential sites for resistance which fracture and constrain it even as it exerts its conforming power"(O'Hanlon 1988: 222). Rejecting the dichotomy between domination and resistance, "we should look for resistance of a different kind,

> ... dispersed in fields we do not conventionally associate with the political; residing sometimes in the evasion of norms or the failure to respect ruling standards of conscience and responsibility; sometimes in the furious effort to resolve in ideal or metaphysical terms the contradictions of the subaltern's existence, without addressing their source; sometimes in what looks only like cultural difference (O'Hanlon 1988: 223).

The 'utopia' described here is not dissimilar from Levinas's paradoxical out-of-place (u-topos) "concern for the 'other' ".

In a more recent article, O'Hanlon (1989), in an attempt to distance Said's position from that of the Subaltern's project, shows how the apparent similarities between the two can be contested by a clear commitment of Said to Foucault's central theme, the critique of a "universal and self-constituting human subject" on the one hand, and "the classic assumptions of liberal humanism underlying much of the work in *Subaltern Studies* ", on the other. The thinness of this defence is, however, revealed by O'Hanlon herself when she recognises that both the *Subaltern Studies* historians and Said neglect questions of gender. While the *Subaltern Studies* historians "have relatively little on issue of gender"(O'Hanlon 1989: 108), she also laments Said's lack of involvement in this issue.[16]

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16 "... indeed, it is surprising, and a matter of some regret, that in making the more general argument for a coherence within the discorse of Orientalism, Said himself did not identify the pervasiveness of its underlying appeal to a naturalized hierarchy in the form of gender difference. It is around this set of categories, it seems to me, that Orientalist representation actually reveals some of its clearest consistencies of assumptions" (O'Hanlon 1989: 107).

One way of explaining this, is that Said fails to abandon the universal totalizing self he deplores in the Orientalist. Furthermore, "the critical dilemmas in Said's work", as described by O'Hanlon,[17] "have no simple resolution", since

> ... they form points of contradiction..... in the effort to find alternative means of grounding its concern from their narrow and distorted construction in a post Enlightenment tradition which discovered liberty as human nature's essence and natural condition (Ibid.: 110).

It is here, at the very heart of the self's freedom, that we find Levinas's proposal particularly revealing and demanding; for "what does make freedom ashamed and limits its unlimitedness is the defenceless resistance in the eyes of the other that teaches us 'you shall not commit murder'. . . . Freedom is unmasked as injustice and summoned to change the exercise of violence into goodness and hospitality" (De Boer 1986: 93). We are faced, furthermore, with a problem originating from "the particular strategy of dissociating Orientalist discourse from its colonial referent" which O'Hanlon finds "certainly true for Inden..... but also for Said..." and ".. reinforced in the Subaltern emphasis upon cultural autonomy" (O'Hanlon 1989: 110). This problem "leaves us with few ways of explaining the very authority of these fictional constructs: why, in short, colonial peoples actually subscribe to any of them" (Ibid.: 110). If Inden is called to account because "he remains rather with a notion of Indological discourse as a species of high intellectual abstractions, whose connection with and forms of power over the colonized remain obscure" (Ibid.), Said's Orientalism, in my opinion, does not depart from the totalizing self of the Enlightenment, implicitly legitimising for the 'Oriental' the same 'murderous freedom' and power which gave rise to 'Orientalism'. Likewise, Inden's appreciation of the Subaltern project ("Indians are.... showing sustained signs of reappropriating the capacity to represent themselves"- Inden 1986: 445), remains trapped in the reassuring self of Western ontology, and the notion of 'post-colonial Indians' representing themselves "in their own authentic voices, surely essentializes what has been a category of very recent historical and cultural creation, in a manner very similar to that of the Orientalism which is the focus of his own attack" (O'Hanlon 1989: 110).

Moreover, whom do the non-Indian contributors to the Subaltern project represent? Whom does Inden, for the same token, represent? If " 'Orientalism' was a European enterprise from the very beginning" (Prakash 1990: 384), what is it that makes them non-Orientalists, or in what way do they distinguish themselves from the "totalitarian tendencies inherent in all of Western philosophy - primacy to the ego and the reduction of everything to the same"? (De Boer 1986: 88). They are either representing 'others' or helping them to represent themselves, unless they make a move away from representation. This implies a move beyond the ontology of the self-same, towards the alterity of the other. In this case the 'other' is not represented, known, or defined, but 'invoked' and encountered at a

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17 "... defining criticism's project of emancipation, without a universalist teleology, and specifying an active historical presence and agency for the colonized without an essentialism of origin which represses difference among them...." (O'Hanlon 1989: 110).

level of "the ineradicable ethical movement beyond knowledge" (Cohen 1986: 4), because "the face is a fundamental event... it is not at all a representation, it is not a given of Knowledge" (Levinas 1988: 168).

Prakash (1990), evaluating the past historiography of India, establishes a continuity in 'refigurations and recuperations' of India's identity by Orientalists, nationalists, Marxists and others. For instance, if Marxists and social historians are to be praised for having "shown in considerable detail that the global history of capitalism has articulated the identity of modern India", their writings "do not explore and expose the alterity which underlies this identity" (Prakash 1990:399). This is better accomplished, according to Prakash, by Said and especially by the Subaltern project and by "what is truly novel and theoretically refreshing in their work - the development of the concept of subalternity" (Ibid.: 400). I would not go as far as O'Hanlon in defining it as "the heterogeneous and analytically unusable category of the subaltern", but I agree in general with her critique of the Subaltern project and I cannot follow Prakash when he claims that,

> from the constitution of subalternity as effects, as identities dependent on difference, it should be clear that the *Subaltern Studies* project shares some of the structuralist and post structuralist critique of the autonomous and sovereign subject (Prakash 1990: 400).

If this is the case, they did not need to employ either Hegelian dialectics or "the familiar 'history-from-below' approach". A project of "resisting colonial and nationalist discursive hegemonies, through histories of the subaltern whose identity resides in difference", is certainly to be recommended. But, as we have already seen, this difference is not, unfortunately, postulated from 'alterity' and it is still the product of humanism's self-constituting subject.

Three specific themes identified by Prakash in his conclusion are particularly relevant: 1) The 'shifting positions' of different historiographies, which conceived the 'third worldness' of India, locate historiography as part of a changing history.[18] 2) The crucial element in formulating critical third world perspectives has found its origin in the 'identification with the subordinated's subject position'. 3) The third world, in the process of being "third worlded" has reached the 'inner sanctum' of the first world - "arousing, inciting, and affiliating with the subordinated others in the first world". In this sense, Prakash, quoting Nandy (1983), welcomes the writing of "mythographies" not only as a "plea for the recognition of the plurality of critical traditions, but a claim for the liberating nature of the victim's discourse..."(Ibid.: 405).

> Although both the colonizer and the colonized have been the victims of colonialism, the colonized have a special story to tell because they not only had to confront the "West" on its own terms of robust hypermasculinity but also to construct and connect with the other subordinated selves of the "West" (Prakash 1990: 405).

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18 " This rules out the comfort of assuming that India, or the third world, will finally speak in a voice that will render all previous ones inauthentic" (Prakash 1990: 402).

To complete this affirmation, it needs to be complemented by a view which sees the former coloniser ready to encounter the subaltern 'others' within the "West" in a different fashion to the one which started colonialism in the first place. This, far from being "a simple-minded gesture of solidarity", summons the self to a 'non-fundational' and 'an-archic' responsibility, which "disrupts the entire project of knowing with a higher call, a more severe 'condition' " (Cohen 1986: 5). When 'resistance' is opposed to power, it assumes the same expressions of the denounced power, and only ethical responsibility, given to the self by the other, is able to disrupt the murderous freedom of the self. "Ethics is the essentially nonencompassable context, the nonplace, the u-topia, within which knowing 'takes place' " (Cohen 1986: 8).

Looking for a 'resistance of a different kind' I propose to turn now to what has been called 'Vernacular Christianity', or Christianity as it developed mainly among the 'peoples of the periphery', also a kind of resistance both towards the people of the centre and those associated with this centre.

Vernacular Christianity

Following James and Johnson (1988) in their study of 'vernacular Christianity', I will try "to disengage the notion of Christianity from that of 'the modern West' with which it has too often unthinkingly [been] linked, especially in representations of the non-Western world", (James and Johnson 1988: 2). Since the contributors to the volume seek to displace the 'oppositional image' "of relations between 'developed' and 'undeveloped' countries", there is a place in our discussion, indeed a prominent one, for a Gramscian approach which takes into account the oppositional character of religion. In so doing, not only do we displace the "image of the European Christian gentleman bringing his revelation, with his rationality, technical wizardry and fear moral argument, to the unenlightened subject" (Ibid.: 3), but we can preserve the counter-hegemonic expressions of the subalterns' religiousness. If it is true that "there are... different ways in which Christianity itself is apprehended... experienced and expressed in 'native' terms", and that "without such a 'native' appropriation, there cannot be a living religion", it is also true that we are witnessing here a struggle in progress. This struggle, which is not alien to the dynamics of 'dialogue', goes beyond "the fundamental contrasts between the absolute claims made for the religion and the complicated history of its practice". The 'tension inherent in Christianity' and the 'conflict of expectations' between a 'universal' faith and its 'vernacular' implementation, disclose not only the tension between Europe and the rest of the world,[19] but also the tension which existed, and to some extent still exists, within different European civilisations.

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19 This might be described as a recent phenomenon since "... Through Europe, Christ (and civilization) is brought to the rest of the world, and the rest of the world must choose to submit or resist..... This interpretation of European history,

In relation to Braudel's (1973) view of the 'enduring character of vernacular cultures', which involves a re-definition of Europe, James and Johnson assert that,

> ... Christianity does not necessarily spread as an organic entity; partial elements, themes, symbols, practices, are characteristically taken up by a particular culture or civilization, ethnic, class, or interest group, at a particular time.

This explanation helps us to focus on the sort of 'vernacular' Christianity which developed among the Rishi. If, on the one hand, we are interested in testing the validity of certain 'theological principles', such as adaptation-acculturation of contemporary Christianity, and their operational thrust in a concrete environment, on the other, we are interested in the ways Christianity has been experienced, comprehended and expressed in 'Rishi' terms, not only in the past but also in the present, when the Rishi are called to explain their experience as Christians.

The present position of the Rishi acquires a double importance since while it explains and interprets their past 'conversion', it also shows the present oppositional character of their being Christians. Their refusal to be considered as 'untouchables' in a Hindu environment is repeated within the Catholic Bangladeshi community, where they appropriate for themselves all the religious signs and symbols which reinforce their claim. Their present struggle as *nuton Khristan* (new Christians) vis-à-vis the old Christians from Dhaka and those converted from 'superior' groups (Muslims or Namasudra), becomes a counter-hegemony not only for the Rishi themselves but also for the foreign missionaries who have embraced their cause and represent the Rishi at an official level. Furthermore, the presence in recent years of Rishi priests testifies to the validity of a struggle which is destined to bear more fruit if these priests and other lay leaders mediate Rishi expectations in a fashion similar to the role of the Gramscian 'organic intellectuals' (Gramsci 1991: 3-23). Taking into account that "the process of development of intellectuals is not one-sided, in the sense of [it] being a mere reflection of class interest, but dialectical", these leaders could represent not only 'a function of group interest but also an instrument of group transformation' (Salamini 1981: 108-9). While Christianity in principle accepts that every group or minority can be represented at a higher level, its practice often contradicts this principle, and thus, even though the Rishi may have their priests they can still be considered priests of a 'lower' quality, in that they belong to a 'lower' group. The temptation of the Rishi priests to segregate themselves from their group - being more "traditional" than "organic" intellectuals - on the grounds that they are ordained not only for their own people but for the 'universal Church', is soon dismissed by the configuration of both the Bangladeshi and Catholic communities which rarely recognises individual claims. Furthermore, whatever they achieve at a personal level, is taken as a group accomplishment rarely achieved by the Rishi in previous times.

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however, postdates European expansion... ... the equation between 'Christendom' and Europe (more specifically Western Europe) is new....." (James - Johnson 1988: 4-6).

There is a fundamental difference between the experience of the Dinka as described by Lienhardt, and that of the Rishi. While the first "regarded the missionaries like all foreigners as inferior to themselves in all but technological and medical skills, and were [as] secure in their own standards as the missionaries in theirs" (Lienhardt 1982: 86), the Rishi, at least those who 'converted' to Catholicism, made their move often out of frustration. Both groups were definitely seeking their "well-being", but their point of departure was essentially different. The Dinka embraced Christianity when they saw that education was "necessary for their cultural and political survival", modifying thus their idea of progress and history (Ibid.: 89-90). The Rishi, who above all needed protection, took longer to value education as a means of progress, and were long satisfied with the protective and 'paternal' presence of the missionary. This did not prevent them from negotiating and re-negotiating their adherence to Christianity, revealing thus if not their superiority over the missionaries at least a degree of autonomy. Like the Dinka, who would "remain Dinka in their loyalties", the Rishi, even those who most strongly profess themselves Christians, recognise that *rakter than* - the strength of the blood - is something that unites them all.

From our point of view, Lienhardt's article becomes most stimulating when he investigates the relation between the theological doctrine proposed by the missionaries and the "process of translation from indigenous to foreign concepts involving a reformulation of experience and thought" (Lienhardt 1982: 90). This translation process, albeit in a different fashion, has been taking place among the Rishi. The difference probably lies in the rich Hindu Bengali vocabulary which the missionaries had at their disposal when trying to adapt Christian theology and terminology into local expressions. There is, however, a complication which arises when we consider the particular interpretation the Rishi give to Hindu ideas and terminology. A parallel with the Dinka experience, involving "a complex reorganization of meanings", as presented by Lienhardt, is illuminating:

> .... The association of particular religious terms, either in Dinka or in Catholic teaching, are mutually defining, and in order to convey a new set of meanings in the same language as the old, an alternative pattern of association is introduced (Lienhardt 1982: 91).

Lienhardt's partial conclusion is that, while at an initial stage Dinka words are given an alternative meaning (that of the missionaries and of non-Christian Dinka), in subsequent generations the 'foreign interpretation' prevails.[20]

> So a systematic set of doctrines may slowly be introduced, through the mutual redefinition of Dinka words and meanings, and a doctrinal orthodoxy carrying with it the acknowledgement of the authority of selected persons to define and maintain it.

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20 "... (I)n subsequent generations, and in families which have inherited the Christian faith and live in nominally Christian communities, the ambiguities of ideas of this generation may be resolved in favour of the foreign interpretations with their doctrinal concomitants similarly redefined", (Lienhardt 1982: 93)

Lienhardt's final conclusion ("If developments in Dinkaland resemble those in many other parts of the world, there may in turn be those who, while coming to deny that personal and doctrinal authority, propose to replace it not by the *laissez-faire* principles of traditional Dinka belief, but by other religious, or more likely political, doctrine"), takes us back to one of the central ideas which motivated our reflection on 'vernacular' Christianity, i.e. the role of religion in the formation of group consciousness and its oppositional character.

We have already discussed, although briefly, the role of the 'organic intellectual' as envisaged by Gramsci. We need now to turn to other Gramscian theories, which, to be sure, originate "from [his] concern to develop a theoretical basis for a revolutionary strategy in the West, which takes into account the highlights of Western culture....."(Salamini 1981: 1). To transpose these theories to our particular situation does not of course solve the Rishis' problem, but perhaps we will find in them a critical method of enquiry which can establish the possibilities of Christianity to offer the Rishi not only the hope of reaching integration with the rest of society but also a consciousness and a responsibility for this integration.

In discussing the role of religion, the main difference we find between the situation described by Gramsci and our own is that he refers to Catholic doctrine as this is practised in a 'Catholic' country, where Catholicism enjoys a place of prominence and power. In this sense, the distinction he makes between the different ways of understanding and implementing religion, discloses the strong connection between 'popular culture' and 'popular religion', as part of people's "common sense".

> Every religion, even Catholicism (indeed Catholicism more than any, precisely because of its efforts to retain a "surface" unity and avoid splintering into national churches and social stratifications), is in reality a multiplicity of distinct and contradictory religions: there is one Catholicism for the peasants, one for the petit-bourgeois and town workers, one for women, and one for intellectuals which is itself variegated and disconnected (Gramsci 1991: 420).

Since Gramsci believed that "popular religion in Italy was at best a source of passive resistance" (Billings 1990: 8), he proposed to 'educate' the 'common sense' of the masses into 'critical understanding' "able to construct oppositional conceptions of life that would become popular and hegemonic..... with leadership provided by organic intellectuals from within their own class and by other intellectual allies.." (Billings 1990: 8).

However, while Gramsci sees religion as a "residue of the pre-capitalist world", and in need of being replaced by "the philosophy of praxis", we should consider that in our case, as in others, "for people living in a culture of religiosity, it is less a matter of their using religion to achieve secular ends than of their becoming able to see through their religious culture toward political goals in such a fashion that their religious discourse and practice become oppositional" (Billings 1990: 8-9). Thus Billings concludes: "Such a transformation of worldview amounts to religious conversion" (Ibid.). If the Rishis' 'conversion' can provoke their opposition to a worldview which sees them as non-persons, another type of 'conversion' - not directly foreseen by Gramsci, but inspired by the same 'philosophy

of praxis'- has taken place among some 'intellectuals' within the Catholic church, especially in Latin America, resulting in a closer contact of this church with the situation of the subaltern masses, and taking the name of Liberation Theology. Its ideas and main theories are by no means limited to the Catholic church or the Latin American scene, but have started to take root in other places, so that we can foresee a future for an Asian Theology of Liberation (cf. Wilfred 1992). The importance of this theology in our discussion lies in the fact that this 'conversion' of the intellectuals took place with the intervention of the people, the laity, and their 'vernacular' way of experiencing and expressing Christianity (cf. Boff & Boff 1986).

The Srilankan Jesuit theologian Aloysius Pieris has articulated during the past decade an extensive basis for an Asian Liberation Theology arguing that there cannot be a praxis/process of liberation without the indigenous identity of the local church.

> .... A liberation theology begins to be formulated only when a given Christian community begins to be drawn into a local people's struggle for full humanity and through that struggle begins to sink its roots into the life and culture of these people, most of whom are non-Christians (Pieris 1988: 111).

Not only does this position bring us back to our starting point, namely 'vernacular' Christianity, but it also transcends both "the Marxist tendency to confuse internationalism with occidentalism" (Pieris 1988: 90-93), and the assumption that "a church becomes asianized when the white faces in the Asian episcopate are gradually replaced by black, brown, and yellow ones!" (Ibid.: 111).

> What makes an Asian Christian community truly indigenous or "local" is its active and risky involvement with Asia's cultural history, which is now being shaped by its largely non-Christian majority (Pieris 1988: 112).

This process envisaged by Pieris is taking place only at the periphery of the official churches, in what he calls "Basic Human Communities", with Christian and non-Christian membership, since the churches of Asia are only a branch of "Euro-American local churches in Asia". Comparing the soteriologies of the Gnostic or non-Semitic religions of Asia (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Taoism), and the view of liberation of the "local theology of Rome" to which the Asian Catholics have been moulded, Pieris concentrates on explaining how the interplay of religiousness and poverty, which constitute Asian reality, must also constitute an Asian theology. "The religiousness of the poor and the poverty of the religious masses together constitute the complex structure of Asian reality that is the matrix of an Asian theology" (Ibid.: 113). The second element envisaged by Pieris is the biblical Semitic approach to human liberation, as it has been discovered by Latin American theologians, which "is also a religious experience of liberation expressed in a thoroughly Asian idiom".

The opposition between two models of liberation (1. Roman Christianity, Stoicism, non-Christian East, and 2. Biblical model), is resolved by Pieris in favour of the biblical perspective. While Roman Christianity and the non-Christian East succeed in promoting a monastic life which is "the personal

rejection of wealth accumulation or mammon as anti-God, and the establishment of a socially recognisable sign of that rejection", the Bible offers another axiom

> ..... totally absent in all non-Semitic religions but explosively true in the context of Marxist analysis: that this same God has made a defence pact - a covenant - with the poor against the agents of mammon, so that the struggle of the poor for their liberation coincides with God's own salvific action (Pieris 1988: 120).

The second axiom presented by Pieris introduces not only a rejection of the Stoic ideal of voluntary poverty, which was not solidary with those condemned to a forced poverty, but also of the monastic communities, which "consider the poor passively as the sacramental recipients of [their] ministry". On the contrary, " the poor must be seen as those through whom God shapes our salvation history" (Ibid.: 122). Thus, borrowing from the Indian biblical scholar George Soares-Prabhu, Pieris presents three conclusions:

> 1. The poor in the Bible form a sociological group whose identity is defined not by religious attitude but by their sociological situation. [In other words we are not dealing merely with a species of "spiritual" poverty, a sort of stoic detachment from material things or attachment to God, but of material poverty].
> 2. The poor in the Bible are also a dialectical group whose situation is determined by antagonistic groups standing over and against them.
> 3. The poor in the Bible are a dynamic group who are not the passive victims of history but those through whom God shapes his history.

The accusation of Marxism made by Rome against Latin American theologians is dismissed by Pieris, since the Bible could not possibly have borrowed its tenets from Marx, and even though the terminology used in this case is Marxian in style, "the Bible goes beyond Marx's classless society in its affirmation of a religious basis for social justice" (Ibid.: 123).

This view is certainly much closer to, and shares the same biblical utopia as Levinas and his asymmetrical relation to the Other, for "Biblical liberation is more than class struggle. It is the God-encounter of the poor, the poor by choice (the renouncer) and the poor by circumstance (the *anawim* of Yahweh)".

> To be more concrete, the Bible, as we understand it in our context, is the record of a religious experience of a "nonpeople" struggling to be a "people", a struggle in which God is an intimate partner (Ibid.: 123)

In this sense Pieris had previously summoned both theologians and anthropologists to follow "a critical discernment ... in pursuing available studies in religion and that fieldwork on this subject be undertaken afresh from within the Third World perspective of peoples struggling for integral human liberation", since "the intricate network of religions and cultures that spreads across the Third World baffles the theologian as much as it does the anthropologist" (Pieris 1988: 97)

This view is largely shared by the exponents of 'Vernacular Christianity' for whom,

> ... The end of the empire has made visible more subtle patterns of encounter than those which dominated our early perception of the Christian and non-Christian. The 'native' has in places appropriated Christianity in such a way as to become more Christian than the formal imperial

> master. This reminds us that Christianity itself in "the West" has not always reflected an imperial view of the world, and indeed that for parts of its own (even recent) history it has been anti-imperial..... Christian identity, as a confession of faith, does not bring with it or produce cultural and social uniformity; but because, as a personal experience, it inevitably goes with a characteristic sense of particular place or time, the theme of personal religious identity cannot be separated from that vernacular context. In this sense, every Christian is a native (James-Johnson 1988: 12).

But again 'personal religious identity' hints at the individuality of the self proper of Western Christianity, which is not the only Christianity available in 'vernacular' terms. Here lies the foundation of what Pieris is proposing to Asian Christianity, the openness to the Other as Other.

> Christians will not adequately address problems of Asian poverty unless they do so within the context of dialogue with Asian religions, and that they will not carry on an authentic and successful interreligious encounter unless they base their dialogue on a concern for the poor. Asian theology of liberation will take shape out of a Christian dialogue with Asian religions. Dialogue and liberation call out each other.... (Knitter 1988: xi).

Pieris is certainly right in pointing out the limitations of "the two 'mighty Karls' of dialectical fame - Marx whose dialectical materialism failed to see that there is indeed revolution in religion, and Barth, whose dialectical theology failed to see that there is revelation in religion". But neither does Marxism stop at Marx, nor theology at Barth. We could add to what we have already said that "Gramsci's stubborn attendance to the real, living texture of popular life, thought and culture" (Hall 1991: 9), represents a way of dialogue which cannot be dismissed when it becomes dialectic, for "religiousness" as much as "common sense" is the beginning not the end of the liberation process.

Latin American liberation theologians have to pay attention to the variety of different cultures and religions of their continent, but in sum they have to appeal to a majority of Christians present there. As Che Guevara, quoted by Pieris himself, sensed : "Only when Christians have the courage to give a wholehearted revolutionary testimony will the Latin American revolution become invincible" (Pieris 1988: 100). This not only demonstrates an evolution of Marxist localised thought but also establishes a divide between the Asian scene and the Latin American situation. Since Che Guevara expressed his invitation many Christian bishops, priests, nuns and lay people have been killed for their affiliation with the poor of their continent. When the 'organic leaders' of Asian liberation theology reach the same position, that will mark a new era for the Asian poor.

I am aware that Pieris is dealing with theology and theological problems and that his position represents a great challenge especially to contemporary "liberal" theologians and to the advocate of aseptic 'inculturation' theories. However, as he reminds us "liturgy has been too apolitical and therefore has not grown out of the life and culture of Asia.... [and] that the first liturgy on Calvary did not take place in the temple and therefore was not a church liturgy; it took place outside the temple, in the midst of human life, human struggle" (Knitter 1988: xiv). The fundamental question we are faced with is: After we recognise the Asian reality of poverty and religiousness, where does liberation theology stand vis-à-vis the poor? Or in other words, is this theology taking a step further towards a more

complex dialogue which involves 'politics'? What will be the response given by Asian liberation theology to the *Dalit Sahitya* ('Writings of the oppressed')? Since,

> ... A greater openness to other revolutionary ideologies has given teeth to this movement of popular writers, which at first had been a mere conscientization exercise within popular religion. Marx, Lenin, Mao, Che, Ho Chi Minh, and Martin Luther King Jr., figure prominently in these writings, for the Dalits feel themselves associated to all the liberation struggles of all the world's oppressed. From openness to all that is liberative in other religions, there has grown a new openness to other secular ideologies. Thus the bhakti movement has lent itself to be used ideologically to destroy the oppressive religious system in which it still has its roots (Knitter 1988: xiv).

The suggestion, for it is only a suggestion, with which we conclude our discussion is that the Self of the local Roman theology present in Asia can survive only as an "anarchical obsession" in relation with the Other, for "if I am obsessed by the other then I do not say 'I' but 'me voici' " (Davis 1991: 223).

APPENDIX 2

MYTHS REPORTED BY THE RISHI

Having analysed a set of Untouchable myths of origin, mainly from Tamil Nadu, Deliège concludes that, despite showing "a high degree of consistency in the ideology of untouchables" (1993:546), these myths " do not question the foundations of caste" and reveal "the inability of untouchables to overcome caste" (ibid.: 547).[1] The 'ambiguity' of Untouchables, is reflected, according to Deliège, in these myths which, while they "contradict the basic concepts of Hinduism", also "uphold caste as an institution" (ibid.). Although ambiguities are not a prerogative of Untouchables, I think that Deliège fails to address their 'ambiguity' as part of a wider context. If it is true that "they are more concerned with basic issues of survival than with questions of ritual impurity"(ibid.: 546), this should give Deliège a clue as to the extent of their 'ambiguity'. Deliège often remarks on how in the myths Untouchables have been tricked into their low position which betrays their 'foolishness'. At the same time, he affirms that Untouchables do not believe themselves as stupid. Some Rishi believe, and I am inclined to accept their answer, that these myths are a creation of the caste Hindus to keep the Rishi happy but under control. In spite of this, these same Rishi accept the name given to them, not only to differentiate themselves from the Chamars, which would be a pointless exercise, given that there are no Chamars in the area, but to find a place within society as 'persons'. Survival is certainly a priority on the Rishis' agenda, but to survive as *manus* is equally meaningful for them. For this very reason they need to recover every sphere of life from the hands of those who 'authorise' them. In this they seem to follow more closely the Gramscian principle of a 'war of position' rather than a 'war of manoeuvre'. This acquires more meaning if we take into account the importance the Rishi attach to the second set of myths which centre around the figure of Ruidas, who, by a process of inversion, does not need to justify to others his low status as a leather-worker, since his devotion places him closer to God.

The following myths, unless stated otherwise, were collected among the Rishi of the Dumuria-Tala-Chuknagar area.

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1 This reading has been applied also to the myth reported by Mosse (1985: 356), which, though exemplifying "the more aggressive and militant attitude of younger 'Dalits' ", still preserves the fundamental attitude of the older myths whereby it upholds the caste institution.

APPENDIX 2A

Myths of Origin

1.

In the Age of Truth a Rishi Moni would offer Puja in the hope of achieving nearness to God. Cow-meat would be used in this Puja. The meat was taken from the two sides of the cow's thighs, and the next day the meat would grow back again in the right place (যথাস্থানে). Faith and truth (বিশ্বাস ও সত্যের) in God and his divine effort/sport (লীলা), made this possible. One day the task [of offering Puja] fell on one Rishi Muni (ঋষী মুনি) who, being tempted (লোভে), stole, cooked and ate some of the meat after the Puja. The next day everybody saw that the meat had not grown back. The chief Rishi Muni conducted an enquiry and it was found that the *Pujari* had stolen and eaten the meat. The *Pujari* did not admit it, and the chief Rishi Muni cursed (অভিষাপ) him saying: "Go hence, you Muchi (তুই মুচি); from now on you will work as a Muchi. You will cut and eat cow's meat; you will perform a low task (নীচ কাজ). This is my curse and from now on you will accomplish this task". Henceforth the Rishi (রিশি) community was divided: the Pujari and his people became the lower section (ছোট ভাগ), i.e. those who perform low tasks, and the chief Rishi and his people formed the higher section (বড় ভাগ). The Rishi were the noblest (শ্রেষঠ) of human kind, but as a result of their deeds (কর্মকাজের জন্য), they became low (অতীনীচ) and untouchable (অশপৃর্শ).

2.

According to the Hindu Scriptures, in the beginning four Rishi were created and from them, seven more. From the Seven Rishi emerged Fourteen Muni (মুনি). The people of Earth are descendants of Monu, one of the fourteen Muni. There are clear illustrative cases that Seven Rishi are intimately related to the solar system. One can see, for example, the Seven Sisters in the North sky. In the same way, the origin of the Rishi dates back to the very beginning.

The Creator (সৃষিট কর্তা), in order to reveal the mystery (রহস্য) of creation, commanded three of these Seven Rishi to descend to Earth. Instantly and in silence they obeyed the command, and descended to the Earth. Fourteen of these from the dynasty of Monu were given the responsibility of educating mankind in all spheres of knowledge (শিক্ষা-দীক্ষা-জ্ঞান) and ethics (ভালোমন্দ). It was their task to reveal to man that there is a Creator and that this Creator has sent messengers to instruct the human race how to worship (পুজা) God . In short, these 'men of God' (পরায়ণ ব্যক্তি) were the Rishi. Having descended to Earth, adoration and contemplation (ধ্যান ধারণা) were started in silence. Hereafter the descendants of Monu started revering the Rishi as supermen upon observing that their physique and features were superior to those of normal human beings. The Rishi started performing miracles, i.e. curing the sick, levitation with the help of meditation (ধ্যান যোগে) etc...

In such a manner the Rishi mingled with the humans and imparted knowledge to them in order to make them devotees (পরায়ণ) of the Creator. Sacrificial altars and temples were erected. The name of the Ritual was Gomedh Joggo (গোমেধ যজ্ঞ).

The Rishi were divided into various groups. Three Rishi were known as 'Munis' from the time of their vow of silence (মৌন). Thereupon the three Munis devoted themselves to the proper guidance of the noblest of the humans through proper Rites, Rituals and Sacrifices (যোগ যজ্ঞ). This was the genesis of mores (ব্যবহারিক প্রকৃতি) and behaviour codes (আচার আচরণ). The consciousness of truth and untruth (সৎ-অসৎ), good and evil (ভালো মন্দ) started to be taught. At the command of the Creator the three Rishi made their appearance on Earth. They were Rishi Muni, Nomosh Muni and Sondhi Muni. When the Joggo started, it was unanimously decided that prior to the Cow sacrifice (বলীদান), the Cow meat would be cooked and offered to god and then distributed among men (মানবগোষ্ঠী) as Prasad (প্রসাদ), of which the reverent humans would then partake. Thereafter, by pronouncing the *sadan* (সাধন) [to evoke the power of asceticism] the cow would become alive again thus proving the fulfilment (পূর্ণ) of the sacrifice.

As can be seen nowadays even on a plump and healthy cow there is a hole situated near to the cow's thighs. This is so because Rishi Moni and his devotees stole some meat out of greed (লোভ). On discovering this, all the others cursed Rishi Moni and his devotees: "You are so base, so low and greedy; your devotees will remain un-illuminated among the society of men". From this time onwards, they decided to keep at a distance and admitted their guilt (অপরাধ) and they were given a lowly status (নীচু কুলে).

3.

The Rishi were thought to be children of Brahman. They practised the Joggo Sacrifice, called the Gomedh Joggo. There was a cow in heaven called Kash dhenu (কাসধেনু), whose milk was used in the Narayan sacrifice. During the Gomedh Ritual, pieces of meat from the cow would be cast into the sacrificial fire. Later, due to the 'worship songs' (সুর) of the Rishi, the cut segments of the cow would grow back again. Once, a Kashdhenu came to graze on the earth and at that point a Gomedh Ritual was performed in the house of Rishi Goutam. Goutam's wife, full of greed (লোভ) at the sight of the plump cow, cut more meat than was required (without needing to do so) and putting the meat in a terracotta vessel (হাড়ী), hid it in the earth for fear of her husband finding it. Because of this, the cow could not return to Heaven fast enough to arrive in time. This created a flaw in the worship/service (সেবায়) of Bhagaban Visnu. On enquiring, Visnu discovered that Goutam's wife had stolen the extra meat, which she denied. Vishnu cursed (অভিষাপ) the woman for this bad deed (খারাপ কাজ): "Since you are so greedy (লোভ) for meat you will be reborn a Muchi, fated to

cut dead meat (মরা মাংস) and eat/enjoy (ভক্ষণ করবি) the carcasses." That was the origin of the Muchi or Chamar.

4.

This story tells us how during the age of Truth, God Sree Krishna used to perform sacrifices for the welfare of all creatures. There were the religious sacrifice, human sacrifice, horse sacrifice, morning sacrifice, cow sacrifice etc... These sacrifices were performed for the welfare and protection of the creatures. The Rishi used to discuss religion (ধর্ম) at Noimisharonno, the famous forest in India for sacrifice. They themselves also sacrificed (যজ্ঞ করতেন) there. It is mentioned in the Hindus' religious book, the Purana, that the last sacrifice was the cow sacrifice, at which all the Rishi were present. Among them, Kopil Muni was the supreme Rishi. The Sacrifice started where the cow was to be burnt and then be restored to life again. After a while the sacrifice ended and the cow should have been brought to life again, but, being short of flesh, it could not come back to life. All were surprised: " Where is the meat?". Nobody recognised the guilt. Later, through the power of Sadhana it was found that the wife of one of the Muni Rishi, unable to control her greed for meat, hid some meat in a hole. Thus goes the proverb: "Too much greed spoils the jati". (অতি লোভে যাতি নষট). Afterwards, God Sree Krishna cursed her so that she had to stay in a lower (নিম্ন) place and perform a lower work during her whole life. From then on, the Rishi *samaj* fell forever to the lowest (নীচে) group. Later, God Sree Krishna restored the cow to life but the cow even now has a hole (ক্ষত) close the thighs which can still be seen.

5.

Muni Rishi was one of the most noble Rishi in ancient times. He had resolved to gain access (লাবের) to God through intense meditation (তপস্যায়) and, being successful in acquiring the power of asceticism (সাধনা - সিদ্ধি), was considered one of the main sages on earth. For this reason he was called Muni Rishi, the Rishi being his descendants. The Rishi were initially a respected (নামী দামি) community and played a dominant role in any *Jogyo* or religious function. But in the course of time the Rishi became without jati (নির্যাতিত), untouchable (অস্পৃশ্য), and neglected (অবহেলিত). The reason for this being that they were too dependent on others and too religious (ধর্মভীরু). Other communities made rapid progress through their own efforts and labour and eventually came to look down on the Rishi with contempt. The Rishi *samaj* declined to such an extent that they were not even permitted to mingle with other people. From then on the Rishi (ঋষি) community were know as the rishi (রিশি).

6.

Once the Rishi people used to roam around the forest praying to God. However, one unfortunate Rishi son had the desire to come to human habitation and lead a domestic life. He married and went to settle in society, but this sudden change meant that he remained poor. He needed to work, and so one day he flayed a dead cow for some money, and was also paid for removing the carcass. From then on the descendants of that Rishi were loathed in society. The skinning of animals is the work of the Chamar, and not the work of the Rishi, who, once considered respectable people, are now hated.

7. (Collected in Baradal)

Our first forefather is Chowgandis, and his son is Ratnagar Dasshu [Dasshu means a rogue, robber or dacoit]. He would always steal and rob, and would go about his life in this way. As a result, God one day called him and asked: " To whom do you give food to eat, by committing theft and robbery?". "To my parents, my wife and my children", he replied. He added that he alone was responsible for it. God then said to him: "Go and ask your parents, wife and children if they will share in your sin." He then went to his father, who replied: " When you were small, I did many sinful acts to feed you. For that, did you share my sin?" Then Dasshu asked the same question of his mother, his wife and children, but all of them replied: " We are here to serve you, but why should we share your sin?" Dasshu went to God and told him that nobody wanted to share his sin...." (Interview with Narhari Das, Baradal, 23-1-1989).

APPENDIX 2B

Ruidas myth

Once there was a 'Muchi' named Ruidas, a very pious (*dharmik*) and devout (*bhakta*) person, who belonged to the *chata beghi* ('small' group). His fame was widespread. Upon hearing of his devotion to God the five Pandav brothers, spurned by their uncle Sri Krishna, invited him to their home, since by feeding the Rishi they would gain holiness (*punya*). Bells would ring in heaven at every morsel he ate and these chimes would be beneficial for every living creature. Approaching Ruidas, one of the brothers named Bhim said : "Noblest Rishi, I have come to invite you to a humble meal at my house", meanwhile holding his breath because of the stench coming from the Pukur where Ruidas kept some hides, and he thought: "What sort of a Muchi is he, and how can he bear this stench?" and speedily he took leave. The next day Ruidas went to the five Pandav house for lunch where Draupadi had prepared five different rice dishes. Ruidas sat down and ate, mixing together the five dishes. Seeing this Draupadi said : "What kind of Muchi is this? How can he mix the five flavours and not eat them separately?". Ruidas heard all this but did not reply and ate on in silence. No bells chimed in heaven.

Once he had left, Krishna came to enquire of the meal and of the chiming of bells. Bhim answered that the bells were not heard since there was no chiming. Krishna asked who had gone to invite Ruidas and what had been said on that occasion. Bhim replied that he merely gave his invitation and returned home, but Krishna did not believe him. Finally, Bhim told him of his comment on the stench from the pond. Krishna then asked Draupadi whether she had made any comment. At first she denied it but later she confessed at having made rude comments to Ruidas.

Krishna said: "It is clear that Ruidas was offended by your comments. Go and invite him properly. You don't know him but he is one of my best *bhakta.*" Arjun went this time and he found Ruidas washing hides in the pond, and, like his brother, he too could not bear the stench, but did not express any disgust. Instead he invited Ruidas saying : " You have already been invited once but we did not show you proper respect, so we are willing to invite you again." Ruidas, touched by such cordiality, accepted. Since it was nearly midday Ruidas invited Arjun to share his meal with him. Arjun accepted and was given some bathing oil, but finding no other source of clean water had to descend to wash in the stinking *pukur* (pond) where the hides were. As he entered the water, to his surprise, Arjun saw Mother Ganges sitting there, and he asked: "Is that you?" "Yes," she replied, "I am indeed the Mother of Ruidas and here I will stay." Thereupon Arjun could no longer detect any stench in the water and was content to bathe there. The following day Ruidas went on time to the house of the five Pandav and was served with great hospitality. Ruidas ate the food and was very happy: every time he had something to eat the bells chimed in heaven and the five Pandav heard the chiming. When Ruidas had finished they gave him *daksina* and he left. This is the story of Ruidas Muchi and the name of the story teller (*kathak*) is also Ruidas.

APPENDIX 3

The Rishi and the Cow

During January 1989 in the mission compound of Chuknagar[1] a cow fell seriously ill. The missionary decided to call the veterinary surgeon who diagnosed that the animal had eaten something contaminated by a dog or jackal with rabies and that eventually it would die. The vet advised the missionary not to kill the animal so as to avoid spreading the infected blood. The cow was thus tied to a tree and left to die. Even before the animal died, the Rishi approached the missionary trying to convince him of the benefits to be gained from the cow's meat and skin. It was not improper, according to them, to eat the meat of this animal since the cause of death was known; the authority of the neighbouring Muslims was quoted as a sign of their good faith, but the missionary would not accept their plea and insisted that the animal be buried. When the mission gardener started digging a hole in the field, many Rishi gathered around; there was a greater crowd than for the burial of any elderly person or child who had died in the Rishi *para*. Once the cow was placed in the hole, a young man taking off his *cadar*[2] covered the cow. The missionary reacted to this, and picking up the *cadar* told the young man that if he did not need it, there was certainly some old person in the *para* who would be able to make good use of it during the winter months. The young man's mother picked up the *cadar* without saying a word. All the others present kept silent and even though they did not dare to contradict the missionary, they agreed with the young man's actions. Meanwhile a child came along with some incense sticks to be used for the funerary ritual, but he too was discouraged by the missionary.

This fact, even though it could be taken as a sporadic circumstance, shows the Rishis' ambiguous and contradictory attitude towards the cow. Firstly, the Rishi, interested in the benefits they could receive from the carcass, beg the missionary to hand over the animal to them, and only when this is refused do they, as good Hindus, want to revere the cow, giving the animal a proper burial. They even had the courage to challenge, at least partially, the missionary's view on this matter, a standpoint which, in any case, would have been well-known to them. The Rishi attitude in this second instance conformed to the Brahmanical view of reverence and sacredness towards the cow. According to this view, the cow has occupied a prominent place in Hindu thought.[3] Even though there is no evidence that during Rigvedic period the cow was regarded as sacred, or that any taboo against cow-killing existed, she still symbolised "motherhood, fertility and liberality", such concepts developing from the

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1 In Chuknagar the missionaries do not carry out typical conversion-oriented activity but maintain only a dialogue with the Hindu Rishi, promoting the education and social uplift of the group.

2 A cloak used especially during winter time.

3 "The wealth of associative meanings applied to the cow from the earliest Brahmanic literature through the Epic and Puranic texts indicates .... that this animal was placed on a special plane from the outset" (Srinivasan 1979: 2).

cow's usefulness in economic and ritual life.[4] *Daksina* or ritual gift is associated with the cow's liberality in giving milk, as is the Sacred Speech - uttered by the priests during rites - which provides for men. The use of ritual fire, milk oblation and *daksina* made possible the performance of sacrifice promoting thus the *rta*, the force which causes order in the universe.[5]

The sacredness of the cow was associated more and more with the 'purity' of the Brahmin, and everyone, including the Sudra, was requested to give cows to the Brahmin, and to respect those he already possessed.[6] The killing of a cow was reputed as monstrous a sin as the killing of a Brahmin, and constant association of the cow with the Brahmin suggests that the sacredness of the two is interdependent, and actions, both good and bad, performed towards each, are judged in the same way.

Literature which discusses the nature of the 'sacred cow concept' in India has greatly increased during the past three decades, and after the traditional viewpoint offered by Brown others have followed. M. Harris (1965), initiating a stimulating debate on this subject, proposes an alternative to this notion suggesting that the sacred cow doctrine can be understood in terms of the "techno-environmental base, Indian property relations and political organization". The Indian ecological setting, he argues, rather than Hindu religious thought is at the basis of the cattle complex, which is "thoroughly circumscribed by the material conditions under which both man and beast must earn their living" (Harris 1965: 225). The 'myth' of the sacred cow is thus, according to Harris, a cultural mechanism, which, through apparently irrational practices (*ahimsa* and beef ban), protects a valuable economic resource.

Harris's functional-ecological approach has been challenged by many authors.[7] Simoons, for instance, contests Harris's hypothesis on the taboo against cow-slaughter and beef-eating which originated, according to Harris, "at a time of widespread environmental degradation and intense ecological pressure on human and cattle population alike". According to this hypothesis, the slaughter and beef-eating taboos developed as "the cumulative result of the individual decisions of millions and millions of individual farmers" (Harris 1977: 147). Simoons (1979) instead maintains that destruction of the environment in northern and western India from 1000 B.C. was largely the result of overgrazing. Furthermore, through literary sources he proves that the sanctity of the cow was imposed from above

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4 " Being thus of an intrinsic value, she confers wealth and prestige upon her owner who comes to regard her as symptomatic of a state of well-being and prosperity" (Ibid.: 4).

5 Ibid.: 5-8. W.N. Brown has classified five different elements which represent the historical progress, from early to Epic and Puranic texts, towards the sanctity of the cow: "...The importance of the cow and its products for the performance of the Vedic sacrificial ritual; the figurative uses of words for the cow in Vedic literature and the later understanding of these figurative expressions as indicating literal truth; the prohibitions against violation of the Brahman's cow; the inclusion of the cow under the general doctrine of Ahimsa; and the association of the cow with the mother-goddess cult" (Brown 1957: 29-49, quoted in Srinivasan 1979:2).

6 According to the Padma Purana, a radiance shone from Brahma's face which split into four parts giving origin to the Veda, the Fire, the Cow and the Brahmin. (*Srstikhanda* 45,70).

7 See: Diener and Robkin 1978; Diener - Nonini - Robkin 1978; Dandekar 1969; Bennet 1967.

and not developed independently by farmers. The very concept of *ahimsa*, seen by Harris as 'positive functioned and adaptive', "does operate in situations where no possible material rewards are forthcoming, and does not function along the purely mechanistic lines that Harris envisages" (Lodrik 1981: 8).

Lately Harris's position has been further challenged by D.O. Lodrik who, examining the Indian institutions of 'animal hospitals' (*pinjrapoles*) and 'place for cows' (*goshala*), maintains that "however one chooses to view the cattle complex of India, inherent in the continuing controversy that surrounds the sacred cow concept are questions of wider significance, one of which concerns the relationship between Hindu religious values and economic development in India" (Lodrik 1981: 9). While studying the historical origin of these institutions, Lodrik concentrates on what, according to him, represents the decisive point in the development of the sacred cow concept: the doctrine of *ahimsa*.[8]

Ahimsa, as Lodrik suggests, reached Brahmanical Hinduism through Buddhist and Jain influence, and even though in late medieval India "the doctrine of *Ahimsa* and the sanctity of the cow [were] still fighting their way against popular resistance and apathy" (Brown 1957: 38), by about the fourth century A.D. "both concepts were firmly entrenched in the Brahmanical literature" (Lodrik 1981: 62). It was, however, with the Muslim presence in India that the sanctity of the cow "came to be regarded as a symbol of Hindu culture, a rallying point for Hindu resistance against the spread of Islam".[9] In this context, the sanctity of the cow and the protection of the Brahmans were combined, reiterating the identification of the binomial Brahman-Cow as basic to orthodox Brahmanical thought.[10]

During the European period, not only did the protection and the sanctity of the cow not lose their importance but, according to Lodrik, became once again a symbol of Hindu identity and resistance.[11] Further developments of this position, Lodrik continues, can be witnessed in the Hindu feelings against

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8 " Revulsion against sacrifice, the economic usefulness of cattle, and religious symbolism all were factors contributing to the formulation of the sacred cow doctrine, but it was ahimsa that provided the moral and ethical compulsion for that doctrine's widespread acceptance in later Indian religious thought and social behavior" (Lodrik 1981: 55).

9 " The use of the cow as a cultural and, indeed, political symbol of Hindu resistance to Moslem power in India achieved its greatest success during the Maratha struggle against Moghul rule during the seventeenth century" (Lodrik 1981: 64-5).

10 Shivaji (1627-1680) was the leader of the Maratha revival: "We are Hindus and the rightful lords of the realm. It is not proper for us to witness cow slaughter and the oppression of the Brahmans" (Lodrik 1981: 65). The sanctity of the cow was further increased during medieval India when *bhakti* and Vaisnava movements promoted devotion to Krishna. "As an incarnation of Vishnu, [Krishna] is revered by all orthodox Vaishnavas, who are usually strict vegetarians and ardent worshippers of the cow..... It is by no means coincidental that the *goshala* in India today is essentially a Vaishnava institution" (Ibid.: 67).

11 " Economic factors alone cannot account for the growing popular support for cow protection in India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Of much greater import was the confrontation yet again of Hinduism with an alien culture. ..... The concepts of *ahimsa* and of the sacred cow were identified with the struggle against Western influence in India" (Ibid.: 69).

foreign rule during the Mutiny, the association of conversion to the Christian faith with the eating of beef, and the symbol of the Gomata, or Mother Cow, as the emblem of "Indianness".[12]

If it can be accepted that the sanctity of the cow 'acted as a catalyst to the revival of traditional Hindu values', it is also true that this issue discloses the divide within the Hindu community. The position of the 1911 Census Report in relation to those who were considered Hindus, even though they (Untouchables and Tribals) "eat beef and do not reverence the cow", shows an apparent contradiction only to be clarified by the caste Hindus' interest during election time: they were then only too ready to accept the alliance of those at the periphery of "Indianness".

Not all the groups at the margin of Hindu orthodoxy were interested in being recognised as Hindus, but many of the Rishi were certainly attracted to being re-admitted into the fold. This can be seen in the activity of the *Mahasabha* among the Rishi, especially among those who had converted to Christianity, as it is described in the mission diaries of this period (1918-1930). The Rishi were "Untouchables" because of their cow-connected activities, and they could hardly be recognised as part of "Indianness". Nevertheless they were offered a chance to 'clean' themselves and to become Hindus and Indians. What was promised and proclaimed at a high level, however, did not have any vibratory effect at local level. In the village, the Rishi were to be recognised as those who remove carcasses of dead animals, skinners and drummers. Their *dharma* and *karma* did not permit them to escape their situation in spite of the many *suddhi* movements which took place in the area. Change of diet and activity was not enough to wipe out the birth mark of a 'Muchi'. 'Indianness' was just a chimera for them, but still represented a dream and the possibility of belonging to the community of human beings: being neither Hindus nor Mlecchas, they were left in a suspended, mid-way position, without land, culture, and dignity to fight for.

At present, while the Rishi are preoccupied in belonging to the community of people who revere the cow, and thus show their respect towards it, including their participation in Vaisnava movements and vegetarianism, they still act ambiguously towards the cow. Beef-eating is quite normal for them and even though they are not as proud of it as some tribal groups of North-Western India, they openly admit this practice before outsiders. A strong Muslim presence has certainly influenced their standpoint in this instance. The Rishi, however, go beyond the mere eating of beef since they indulge in eating carrion (*golsa*), and it is for this reason that they are considered a *mayla* (dirty) *jat*. In such cases they try to shamefully cover up their activity by stating that this was something practised only in the past.

Both carrion-eating and their reputation as cattle poisoners must be viewed in the general framework of their position within society. As 'Untouchables' the Rishi were not, strictly speaking, permitted to

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12 " It is not surprising to find today that the symbol of the Congress Party, the successor to the Indian National congress, is the cow and suckling calf" (Ibid.: 70).

possess either land or cattle. The cow was their property only when the animal died, and it is not surprising that they took advantage of the cow's meat since this was easily available to them, and their only nourishment in time of hardship. For this reason they developed their own method of processing and drying beef so that it could be used during periods of scarcity. It is also in periods of indigence that the Rishi usually decide to poison cattle.[13] Only a close circle of people can guarantee the results of poisoning, something rarely performed by a single person. Firstly an expert will prepare the potion to be given to the cow or the instruments used for that purpose,[14] then someone coming from outside the village, normally other Rishi or even Muslims in some cases, carry out the physical act of poisoning, leaving the task of collecting the carcasses to the unsuspected local Rishi. To complicate a possible police inquiry even more, the poisoned cattle are thrown into the river and picked up downstream, many miles away.

Since Independence and with a stronger presence of Muslims in South-West Bangladesh, cattle poisoning has been used by the latter, even though actually carried out by the Rishi, to ruin many small Hindu landlords, who were thus compelled to sell their land and to migrate to West Bengal. At other times, the same method has been used by Muslim *mahajans* to take revenge on other Muslims. The blame for this activity has rarely fallen on the Muslim *mahajan* who controls the police and village politics, while for the Rishi the outcome is that they are always considered guilty. It is not unusual, however, for the Rishi themselves to use poisoning as a defence against aggression, or as vengeance for an injury. Nevertheless, as we stated earlier, "the poisoning of cows is done only as a last resort in case of economic hardship; by far the most common cause of cows' death is disease".[15]

The leather industry is a flourishing sector of the Bangladeshi economy and it occupies the first place in the export of the total output; in fact 97.5% of leather production was exported during 1987-88 (Huq and Nabiul Islam 1988 :14, Table 3.1). In the same period the earnings from leather were calculated at 12.1% of total export earnings (Ibid.: 8). Given that "the production process is heavily dependent on raw materials, hides/skins and chemicals together taking 70% of the total production cost", and that "hides and skins are obtained from local sources",[16] it follows that the largest share of the profits is taken by the middle-man or by those who deal in hides to be supplied to the leather

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13 "The poisoning of cows is done only as a last resort in case of economic hardship; by far the most common cause of cows' death is disease" (Tobanelli 1989:11)

14 "Three principal methods of cattle-poisoning are in vogue. One of these is simply to give white arsenic wrapped in a castor oil leaf, which is licked by the cattle. A second method is to grind the ghunchi berry to a fine powder, and, having made a paste with water, to roll this into the shape of a long thorn, which is dried in the sun till it is hard, and then pressed into the head or neck of an animal. The third device is to make a poisonous snake bite a piece of rag wound round a pointed stick, which is then forced into the anus of a cow or a bullock" (Lillington 1908:352).

15 "The last recent case of massive poisoning allegedly took place in the Satkhira area in 1987 during the dry season" (Tobanelli 1989:11).

16 Huq and Nabiul Islam 1988: 60. ".... In the recent past the supply situation has been boosted following the increase in the supply of hides from live animals coming from the neighbouring countries".

industries. This trade is mainly carried out by those who can advance cash, which is obtained by banks loans or more often from money-lenders who grant loans only at a very high interest. Some Rishi in the area have ventured, when supported by local *mahajans*, to expand their business, even contacting and supplying leather industries in the Dhaka region but, as soon as the money-lenders turn their back on them, their ephemeral fortune collapses, leaving them with only the blame and/or guilt of being beef and carrion eaters involved in the poisoning of cows.

Once more the Rishi find themselves at the periphery of society, without even being able to take full advantage of the few possibilities that arise from their low position, and suffering only the negative aspects of it. It seems that they are not recognised as part of "Bangladeshiness", in much the same way as they were not recognised as part of "Indianness" in the past and, even though conditions have changed in 'Islamic Bangladesh', the cow seems once again to represent the pivotal reason of their alienation from society.

'Religious' symbolism and socio-economic factors are too intertwined to be separated.[17] For a complete explanation of the Rishis' ambiguous attitude towards the cow, we must take into account the more general ambiguity of their exclusion from society. Firstly, even though most of the states in India have enacted a ban on cow slaughter as prescribed by the Indian Constitution (Art. 48), in West Bengal, directly bordering on south-west Bangladesh, the ban is only partial;[18] and secondly, the Bangladeshi Hindus did not lose sleep over protecting the cow.[19] As a result, the caste Hindus of this country, ready to do business with the Muslims and protecting themselves more than the cow, dismiss the latter's slaughter of cows by calling the Muslims 'Mlecchas', while the Rishi for the same reason are 'dirty' and "Untouchables".

The limitations of *samajic* codes are well-known to the Rishi, since they can appreciate the fact that the Muslims who eat beef are not treated as 'dirty' by the caste Hindus, and that the caste Hindus who eat pork are not 'dirty' in the eyes of the Muslims, or if both are 'dirty' for each other at an ideological level, they are not so at a practical level. The Rishi, on the other hand, eating '*mara*' are extremely unclean for both the caste Hindus and the Muslims at both ideological and socio-practical levels. The double standard of *samajic* codes of conduct is even more evident when the 'untouchability' of the Rishi women does not prevent caste Hindu and Muslims from taking advantage of their position in society to command their sexual services.

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17 As Lodrik rightly points out, the gorakshan, or protection of the cow, "receives further ethical and social sanctions from the Hindu concept of dharma" as the 'pursuit of righteousness, duty, and virtue' (Lodrik 1981:156).

18 When in 1979 Vinoba Bhave went on hunger strike for five days, it was to protest against cow slaughter which occurred especially in West Bengal and Kerala (Lodrik 1981:235, note 16).

19 " Prior to 1947, goshalas existed in what is now Pakistan and Bangla Desh but few, if any, survived the upheavals of Partition. ..... To the best of my knowledge, today no institutions are to be found outside India and Nepal" (Lodrik 1981: 240, note 5)

A few recent events which took place in our area typify the reaction of the Rishi to the position given them in society because of their connection with the cow. In 1987 a Rishi teacher organised a meeting of his fellow *jati* members of Hatbash area, inviting both the village and the Upozila Chairmen. At the meeting he told them both about the segregation and injustice suffered by the Rishi, asking at the same time whether the Rishi should be considered Bangladeshi citizens, and if so, what would be done to solve the problem. The Upozila chairman, recalling their rights and duties as Bangladeshis, invited them to turn to him directly whenever they had a problem. Later, in 1989, action was taken by a group of Rishi students of Chuknagar secondary school. They wrote a letter to be sent to the village, the Upozila and Zila Chairmen, to the headmasters of the secondary school and college, and finally to the President of the Commission for Human Rights in Bangladesh. In that letter, they described their situation (no chance of getting a hair cut at the barber's and prohibition on entering public places), they gave evidence of their continued segregation despite their own goodwill, and they asked these authorities for action. In the documentation attached to the letter, they testified that only a small proportion (15 men out of circa 500 people, of whom 282 were adults) were still involved in the occupation of skinning. These carry on the *jati* occupation only occasionally and because required to do so by the community at large. In the letter the students also mentioned the past activities of their forefathers and recognised that 'bad work' (*kharap kaj)* had been practised, clearly alluding to skinning, eating beef and carrion (*kusamskar*- the same word as that used for 'superstition'). After quoting the two great Bengali poets, Tagore and Nazrul Islam, the students concluded: "According to these poets we too are human beings (*amra manus*)." This letter prepared and signed by the Rishi students was also signed by five representatives of the Rishi community.

After these representations to the civil authority another followed during 1990, which was directed at the Hindu *samaj*. The Rishi of Sabdia, Altapol and Bejipur (Keshabpur-South Jessore) wrote a circular letter informing all the Rishi of the area about the activity of their newly established committee: 1) To abolish Untouchability, 2) To renounce skinning carcasses of cows and other dead animals, 3) To abstain from meat. We must note here that while the decision of the last two issues was entirely up to the Rishi, the first one is, in terms of the caste Hindus, an undue appropriation. The fulfilment of 2) and 3) does not necessarily result in the attainment of 1). The Rishi pay little attention to the theory of *karma*, the weapon used by the caste Hindus and those who share their ideology, to enforce 'Untouchability'. Nevertheless, the programme of the committee foresees the abandonment of the old 'bad practices' (*kuprathaguli*) and their integration with the high caste (*uccu sreni*) Hindus. Having invited all the other Rishi to unite in this common cause, they concluded: "We have promised before Hinduism (*Hindu-dharma*) to abandon our bad habits (*kukarma*) and to punish all those who will contravene the norms established by this committee". The surname used to sign the letter by the 11 members, the committee president and the secretary, was not *Das* (দাস), the name most recently adopted by the Rishi (ঋষি) in South-West Bangladesh, but *Rsi* (ঋষি), written in the old form, which refers to the Muni-Rishi, writers of the Veda, highlighting the *dharmik* element of their commitment.

APPENDIX 4

Partition of the Krishnagar Diocese[1]

Following the addition in 1870 of four new Districts (Dinajpur, Rangpur, Couch-Behar and Jalpaiguri), to the North of the Apostolic Vicariate of Central Bengal, the apostolate 'beyond the Ganges' was intensified at the beginning of the century: in 1902 a group of Pahari were converted and later Fr. Rocca started evangelising among the Santal, the Munda, and the Mahali, founding the two centres of Danjuri and Benedwar.[2] This new expansion required money and personnel,[3] leading to competition between the two mission territories. The problem, however, could not be postponed and the financial situation needed an answer. Bishop Taveggia tried in many ways to avoid the division of the mission even proposing to hand the mission over to another Institute.[4]

The superior in Milan, Fr. Manna, expressed his disapproval of this position in a letter written to Taveggia.[5] He remarked there: "It is not only with big sums of money that one provides for the well-being of the Mission, but above all with zealous apostolic personnel who, being able to find the money, always and in any case, give to the souls something that no money could ever give...".[6] Manna concluded by proposing a concentration of the missionaries in one area and a possible partition of the mission.

Following Manna's proposal, all the missionaries met in Krishnagar and unanimously accepted that the mission should be divided[7] and, taking the Ganges as a natural border, they opted for the

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1 Dealing with this issue, I will follow Obert's '*Spigolature Storiche....*' (*AME* XXXI /20:30ff) since it is based on original material, he himself being a witness of the period under examination.

2 Rocca also laid the foundations for the new Christian communities among the Munda and the Oraons in Jalpaiguri District.

3 In 1910, Bishop Taveggia (Letter to Rocca 30 July, 1910), answering a letter written by Rocca, did not endorse the latter's proposal to divert part of the money meant for the 'Bengali mission' to the mission 'beyond the Ganges', since, according to Taveggia, the two mission areas had to proceed together. In spite of this, Taveggia helped the new mission in a significant way. Since 1910 all the missionaries but three (among them Fr. Costa), destined for the diocese of Krishnagar, were sooner or later to work in the Mission beyond the Ganges (Obert 'Spigolature Storiche....', *AME* XXXI /20:30-31).

4 Taveggia had written to Rome many times receiving evasive answers and pious exhortations instead of concrete help. ("Entrust yourselves more to Providence!", he was told by the Pope - Obert op. cit., p.70). In these circumstances Taveggia wrote: " We have to find a solution. We have not got adequate means, but rather than reduce all the work of the Mission it would be better to hand it over" (Taveggia, Letter to the Procurator in Rome, April 1926, quoted in Obert, op.cit.., pp. 71-72).

5 Even though Manna understood that the mission was in a difficult financial situation, he could not approve of the fact that the missionaries of Bengal "would desert the field for a purely economic reason" (Manna , Letter to Taveggia, 8 May, 1926, quoted in Obert, ibid.).

6 Ibid.

7 The memorandum drawn up on that occasion and sent to Manna gave the reasons for this decision:
1. The great responsibility of being in charge of the evangelization of 18 million people.

northern area of the mission.[8] In conclusion, the missionaries in a memorandum asked the superior in Milan to take the necessary steps in order to accomplish this division.

Manna, in his reply of August, 1926, tried to make them back track on their decision, offering to send someone to present the matter to the Apostolic Delegate for India, who could use his influence to obtain from Rome a consistent budget for the entire mission, thus avoiding the partition.[9] The prompt reply of Taveggia in September of the same year was, however, very forthright: someone was going to be sent in order to ask for the speeding up of the process of partition.[10]

In March 1927, Taveggia received a letter from the Prefect of Propaganda Fide, Cardinal van Rossum, who assured him that the division of his "immense diocese", was under examination.[11] In June of that same year, the Cardinal Prefect writing to Taveggia announced the formation of the Diocese of Dinajpur. The Papal Bull of the erection of the new diocese bears the date of 25 May, 1927; Taveggia was nominated as the first Bishop of Dinajpur on 28 June and was asked to continue as Apostolic Administrator of Krishnagar until a new bishop was nominated.[12]

Fr. Manna, writing to Taveggia and including in his letter all the documents of Propaganda Fide regarding the division of the diocese, informed the Bishop that no missionary congregation was as yet available to take charge of Krishnagar. The missionaries in the Southern area were invited to stay on until the new missionaries arrived to take over.[13]

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2. The reminder written by the Pope that in no place should evangelization be postponed.
3. Shortage of missionary personnel, also in the near future.
4. No financial help received from the Institute in Italy.
5. By concentrating the work force and resources in one area, the work would benefit.

8 The following reasons were given:
1. The Southern area of the mission was long established and the Christians were already full-grown, so that new methods and a new approach could benefit this mission. The Northern area on the other hand, where the Santali and other tribal groups had been recently converted, asked for continuity in this initial stage.
2. Two-thirds of the missionaries were already established in the North.
3. All the missionary stations in the South were already equipped with buildings, churches, houses, convents, schools etc...and many important villages also had a masonry chapel; in the Northern mission stations in contrast the missionaries were living in huts.

9 Manna put forward, among other reasons, the fact that it was difficult in a short time to find another missionary Institute to take over the southern area of the mission, since this was not 'a very appealing region' (Manna, Letter to Taveggia, 12 Aug., 1926, quoted in Obert, op. cit., p. 74).

10 Taveggia wrote on that occasion to the superior of the Servites, who were looking for a mission territory in India, offering them the southern part of the Krishnagar Diocese (5 Districts, 7000 Christians and 9 million 'unfaithful' to whom they could preach the gospel).

11 Van Rossum, Letter to Taveggia, 16 March, 1927, quoted in Obert, op. cit., p. 76. The Cardinal was very much impressed with the numerous conversions made by the missionaries during the past year. He clearly refers to the conversions in the Northern part of the diocese among the tribals.

12 Ibid.

13 He also expressed his deep regret that Krishnagar, the very first old mission of the Calocerians in Bengal, had been lost for ever to his Institute in spite of the fact that he had tried until the end to hold onto this mission (Manna, Letter to Taveggia, 17 June, 1927, quoted in Obert, op.cit., p. 76).

In 1928, the Diocese of Krishnagar was entrusted to the Salesians of Saint John Bosco. At the moment of the division the Catholic population was distributed as follows: The Southern area, 6118 (1172 in Krishnagar, 2290 in Bhabarpara and 1956 in Jessore-Simulia); in the Northern area beyond the Ganges the Catholics totalled 12,503.[14] These figures show why the PIME missionaries preferred to work in the area North of the Ganges among the tribals. In only 20 years (1905c.-1927) they achieved double the number of conversions made in the South where they had been working for more than 70 years. In spite of the economic factor, the human satisfaction of reaping the reward of hard work proved the greater 'temptation' for these 'labourers of the Lord's vineyard', who opted for an area with better prospects.

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14 Taveggia in his *'Relatio Extraordinaria'* of 1927 to Rome , reported a total of 2000 Rishi in his Diocese, counting together, most probably, the Simulia and Bhabarpara Rishi : " *Inter Hindoos infimum gradum in scala sociali tenent Muci, ab aliis despecti. Ex iis fere 2.000 Catholici sunt.*" Earlier, reporting the number of apostates, he remarked that "*Apostasiae nonnullae - Quidam, insurgentibus difficultatibus, maxima cum facilitate vadunt et redunt*" (AME XXXI/1:1103).
The approximate value of houses and churches passed to the Salesians was, according to Obert, 175 thousand Rupees. In spite of the fact that Bishop Taveggia had not intended to hand over the funds of the mission as well, the Salesians were granted one-third of the shares the mission held in Hong Kong, valued at 35.000 Rs. (Obert, 'Spigolature Storiche...', AME XXXI /20:77-78).

APPENDIX 5

Sources for the Rishi Mission History in Jessore and Khulna

1. The Mission in Jessore-Simulia.

1.1. First period: PIME Missionaries (1855-1927)

The most important source we possess for the very first period of the history of this mission, is a recent publication by G. Kottuppallil (1988), *History of the Catholic Missions in Central Bengal 1855-1886*. The author, at present teaching history at the Sacred Heart Theological College of Shillong (India), is an Indian Salesian priest and a historian. The book is the result of a Ph.D. thesis presented in 1986 at the Gregorian University, Rome. This study, based on research in archives and original material, deals with a period of 31 years, from the foundation of the Catholic missions in 1855, in Central Bengal (Districts of Khulna, Jessore, Krishnagar, Mursidabad, Rajshai, Bogra and Malda), up until the establishment of that same mission (other four Districts were added to the North and Faridpur to the East) in 1886 into the Diocese of Krishnagar. The overall importance of the study lies in the fact that the author belongs to the Indian Catholic community and his reading of facts and events bears the characteristics of a young Church ready to take its destiny into its own hands.

I do not share Kottuppallil's view in his analysis that others were prevented from becoming Christians from the moment when the missionaries approached the Rishi. Many of the missionaries working in Jessore expressed the same opinion, and even in more recent times, some missionaries attribute their failure among the Muslims and high caste Hindus to the same reason. However, if we look at the history of the Catholic missions in this area over a long period, the material suggests a different conclusion: the missionaries were interested in 'converting' the Rishi simply because they were the only ones who accepted, in one way or the other, missionary presence among them. Apart from historical data, Kottuppallil's work is also particularly valuable for his concluding chapter where he discusses the missionary methodology of the Calocerians (later PIME) missionaries, and the obstacles they had to face in evangelising this area.

The second published source is that of G.B. Tragella (1950-1963), *Le Missioni Estere di Milano Nel Quadro degli Avvenimenti Contemporanei*, a three-volume work which contains five brief chapters about the mission in Bengal from its beginnings until 1900. The work, well documented with material found in the PIME archives (Rome), "is an example of the history of a young Church presented from the viewpoint of a missionary institute in Europe" (Kottuppallil 1988: xxii).

The last and most valuable published source is a brief account of the history of Catholicism in Jessore and Khulna districts and the missionary life of Antonio Marietti, written by one of his Bengali

catechists, Sri Man Mohan Ghose, যশোহরের কাতলিক মন্ডলীর ইতিহাস (*Jasohrer Katalik Mandalir Itihas- The History of the Catholic Church in Jessore*), which was added as an appendix, to the third volume of Marietti's, *Khristio Sabhar Sadharan Itihas* (*History of the Church* - Calcutta 1898). Ghose's work, even if some dates are inaccurate, is still a valuable source; most of all because it represents the view of a native Christian and one who actively participated in the missionary apostolate as a catechist. His account of the work among the Rishi is particularly relevant to our study, and, even though his judgements are those of a caste Hindu, they still contain many insights into the group and the missionary approach to them.

The original documents most relevant to our study are found in the PIME Archives (Rome), quoted in the abbreviate form *AME* (Archivio Missioni Estere). These letters and reports of the missionaries operating in the Mission of Central Bengal (mainly in Jessore and Simulia in our case), were sent either to their superior in Milan or to the founding agencies of the Propaganda Fide of Lyon and Paris (Oeuvres Propagation de la Foi).

For the first period of time under examination (1855-1900), apart from the sources already available in Kottuppallil and Tragella, it was necessary to consult the archives in order to obtain additional material. For the following period (1900-1928), I have relied only on the *AME* original material. The volumes consulted were:

XII	Agra-Bengala: Generali
XIII	Bengala: Superiori Ecclesiastici
XIV	Bengala: Missionari (1855-1868)
XV	Bengala: Missionari (1869-1890)
XXXI 1-4	Bengala: Missionari
XXXI / 11	Bengala: Missionari
XXXI / 12	Bengala: Missionari
XXXI /15	Bengala: Missionari
XXXI / 20	Bengala: Missionari

Some of this material, particularly relevant for our study, is discussed below:

Francesco Rocca, who went to Bengal in 1892 (Tragella 1950-1963 / 3:197) and was stationed at Krishnagar, wrote a brief description of the early history of the mission entitled '*Cenni sulla Missione del Bengala Centrale*' (*AME* XII: 971-1001). Although containing some inaccuracies, being written around 1900-1901[1], it represents the first attempt of these missionaries to reflect upon their past history. Of particular interest are the pages dedicated to the description of the country where the missionaries were operating and the people with whom they came into contact.

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1 Kottuppallil (1988: xxii) maintains that Rocca wrote his sketch in 1905. Since Rocca refers to Garrovi as the missionary in charge at Jessore while he is writing, it is plausible to date his work around 1900-1901, because in 1902 Picchi is in charge of Jessore and Garrovi is his helper for a few years before going back to Italy.

Bishop Pozzi's report to the Propagation of the Faith (1893), Fr. Nava's sketch of the Simulia mission (1914), and Castelli's description of missionary work in Jessore district, deserve close attention for their remarkable insights.

Around 1923-4, while he was stationed at Simulia, Obert wrote a summary of the foundation of Jessore and Simulia missions based on the memoirs of Roti Sarkar, a catechist at that time, and other old people of Simulia. Details are not accurate and dates very approximate. These "*Brevi cenni riguardo alla fondazione e allo sviluppo della missione di Jessore, Simulia e Sunderbone*" (*AME* XXXI /20), were later partly incorporated in Obert's second manuscript: "*Spigolature Storiche riguardanti la Missione di Krishnagar 1855-1927*", which bears the date of 15 October, 1953. Obert used as sources (he draws up a list in his presentation to the reader) all the material available up to that time in the archives in Bengal: memoirs (especially those of Fr. Belgeri), profiles of the missionaries, articles of the 'Catholic Herald' of Calcutta...etc... Particularly well documented, with original material and letters, is his account of the partition of the Diocese of Krishnagar in 1927 (Appendix 5). As he says in his introduction, he was aware that he was not writing a proper history of the Mission but "at least a less incomplete one". It is worth mentioning that he was still interested in the history of a mission which 26 years previously had been left by the PIME fathers who handed over Krishnagar to the Salesians to work in the new Diocese of Dinajpur.

Other minor documents deserve some attention: even though they contain only approximate descriptions of past events, they are generally precise about the period when they were written. Such is the case of V. Belgeri, '*Note storiche sulla missione del Bengala Centrale*' (*AME* XXXI/1), and an anonymous manuscript, which resumes from Ghose, Pitor Sarkar and Belgeri, entitled '*Storia di Jessore e distretto annesso*'. A transcription of this was found in the *Diocesan Archives of Khulna* (*DAK*).

Additional material was also available in the periodical *Le Missioni Cattoliche* published by the PIME missionaries and in the form of Baptismal Registers and Annual Reports in the *Simulia Parish Archives* (quoted *SPA*). Unfortunately *SPA* has not been properly classified and its quotation can only be approximate.

1.2. Second Period: The Salesian (1928-1952)

Published material on the Simulia during this period is found in a few pamphlets issues by the Salesians of Krishnagar entitled *From the Heart of Bengal*, and *Aemulamini*.

The main source of unpublished material is to be found in the Mission Diaries of Simulia, which cover the period almost entirely. These have been classified as *SIMULIA* 1 (*SIM.1*; 1931-1936), and *SIMULIA* 2, (*SIM. 2*; 1936-39 and 1945-58). In addition to this, the diary of Jessore Mission (*JES.*) adds some useful information.

Other relevant documents in the form of letters and reports are to be found in the *Diocesan Archives of Khulna* (*DAK*) and the *Xaverian Archives of Khulna* (*XAK*). The classification of this material is often very approximate in unnumbered files and pages, with consequent problems for quotation.

1.3. Third Period: The Xaverian Missionaries (1952-1990)

The sources dealing with the history of this period (letters, reports, statistics, meetings, etc...), are found in *Simulia 2* (until 1958) and in the two archives of Khulna (*DAK* and *XAK*). Some relevant letters, reports and mission registers are also found in the *Simulia Parish Archives*(*SPA*).

A valuable source of information in terms of dates, events and missionary personnel movements is the *Cronaca* (quoted *Chronicle* and kept in *DAK*) which covers the first eighteen years of the whole mission (July 1952- December 1970). The Chronicle was primarily written by Mgr. Battaglierin and his Vicar General, Fr. Gitti. Of particular interest is the period September-December 1965, during the Indo-Pakistani War, when the missionaries were obliged to reside in Khulna. The anonymous writer presents a very personal and colourful account of events, being very critical of his superiors and the way they handled the situation.

2. The Satkhira-Baradal Mission

2.1. First Period: the Jesuits (1913-1952)

Some published material, in the form of short reports, appeared in the magazine *Our Field* (*OF*), issued by the Jesuits working in North India, for private circulation only. It contains the only note about the first five years of this mission.

The most relevant documents are the seven Mission Diaries which cover the entire period from 1918 until 1952. They were classified as:

SATKHIRA 1 (1918-1924)	(*SAT.1*)
SATKHIRA 2 (1925-1930 and 1937-1939)[2]	(*SAT.2*)
SATKHIRA 3 (1939 Nov.-1943)	(*SAT.3*)
SATKHIRA 4 (1944-1947)	(*SAT.4*)
SATKHIRA 5 (1948 -1950 June)	(*SAT.5*)
SATKHIRA 6 (1950 July-1967)	(*SAT.6*)

Additional documents are also found in *DAK* and *XAK*. Some letters, reports, statistics and mission registers in the *Satkhira Parish Archives* (*SAT. ARCH.*) have also been consulted.

2.2. Second Period: The Xaverians (1952-1990)

The great bulk of material covering this period is found in the two archives in Khulna (*DAK* and *XAK*), in the diary *SATKHIRA 6* (1950 July-1967 / *SAT.6*), in the *Satkhira Parish Archives* , in the *Baradal Parish Archives* (BPA), and in the *Chronicle* (1952-1970).

Some articles describing missionary activity in both areas appeared in magazines which the Xaverians publish in Italy: '*Fede e Civiltà*' (*FC*) and '*Missione Oggi*' (*MO*). Missionaries' biographies and general reflection on missionary activity published in Xaverian booklets (*Notiziario Saveriano*, *Vita Nostra, Ripensare la Missione*), are worth consulting.

'*Mosquito*', an internal periodical (mimeo) of the Xaverians in Bangladesh, published during the 1970s, contains some useful notes and information on missionary life. Its critical and sarcastic comments, appreciated by all the Xaverians, were undervalued by the Superiors in Italy, since the latter were often 'bitten' by *Mosquito*.

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2 The Satkhira mission remained closed from 1930 until 1937.

GLOSSARY

Bengali-English transliteration

Vowels:

অ a, ŏ	ই (ি) i	উ u	ঋ ṛ	ঐ oi (ai)
আ(া) ā	ঈ (ী) ī	ঊ ū	এ (ে) e	ঔ (ৌ) ou (au)
			ও (ো) o	

Consonants:

ক k	চ c	ট ṭ	ত t	প p
খ kh	ছ ch	ঠ ṭh	থ th	ফ ph (f)
গ g	জ(য) j, z	ড ḍ, ড় ṛ	দ d	ব b (v)
ঘ gh	ঝ jh	ঢ ḍh, ঢ় ṛh	ধ dh	ভ bh
ঙ ṁ (ṅg)	ঞ ñ	ণ ṇ	ন n	ম m
য j, য় y	শ ś	হ h	ৎ t	ঁ sn
র r	ষ ṣ	ঃ h	ং m (ng)	ঁ jñ
ল l	স s	ক্ষ kṣ	ঁ (~ above the vowel affected)	

ঁ y (doubles the sound of the previous consonant)

শ্ব often S (becomes W) / at other times T (becomes V or doubles the consonant)

"This is the standard Indic system, with modification to suit Bengali. Vowels have their original phonetic values; c sounds like unaspired ch; t, th, d, and dh are always dental, but ṭ, ṭh, ḍ, and ḍh are always retroflex" (Maloney at al. 1981).

Transliteration	বাংলা	Meaning
Abatār	অবতার	Incarnation
Abhiśāp	অভিশাপ	Curse
Aboidha samparka	অবৈধ সম্পর্ক	Illicit relationship
Adhārmic	অধার্মিক	Incoherent [irreligious, impious and unrighteous]
Adhīśwar	অধীশ্বর	The lord and king of the spiritual world
Adṛsta	অদৃষ্ট	Destiny or fate (for Hindus)
Āgrāsan	আগ্রাসন	Aggression
Ālo	আলো	Light
Andha Biśwāsī	অন্ধ বিশ্বাসী	Blind-faith devotee
Ārādhanā-upāsanā	আরাধনা-উপাসনা	Worship
Asāmājik	অসামাজিক	Unsocial
Aśikṣita/Aśikkhita	অশিক্ষিত	Ignorant/illiterate
Aspṛśya	অস্পৃশ্য	Untouchable
Aspṛśyatā	অস্পৃশ্যতা	Untouchability
Aśubha	অশুভ	Inauspicious and evil
Aśūcī	অশূচী	Impure or polluted
Aśuddha	অশুদ্ধ	Impure and unholy
Ātmīya / Āttīya samparka	আত্মীয় সম্পর্ক	Relation of kinship
Atyācār/Attācār	অত্যাচার	Oppression
Baṁśa / Baṅgśa	বংশ	Lineage

Bar	বর	Miraculous manifestation or a boon
Bara lok	বড় লোক	Important and rich persons
Bara netā / Dalpati	বড় নেতা–দলপতি	'Big' leader or headman
Bāṛī	বাড়ী	Homestead
Barna - boiṣamya	বর্ণ বৈষম্য	Caste discrimination
Bebsā/Bybsā	ব্যবসা	Commerce and business
Bet - cāc	বেত – চাঁচ	Handicraft baskets, mats and fences made of bamboo or rattan
Bhadra samāj	ভদ্র সমাজ	The 'well behaved group' among the Rishi.
Bhadralok	ভদ্রলোক	A gentlemen or person of good family
Bhagabān - Iśwar	ভগবান – ঈশ্বর	God
Bhaj	ভজ	Religious and devotional celebration
Bhakti	ভক্তি	Devotion
Bhāt khābār	ভাত খাবার	To eat rice together - a meal
Bhikṣā/Bhikhā	ভিক্ষা	Begging
Bhūt	ভুত	Evil spirits (usually male)
Bicār	বিচার	Judgement carried out by a village council of headmen
Bidhi niṣedh	বিধি–নিষেধ	Prohibitions
Bighā	বিঘা	Land measure (a third of an acre)
Bil	বিল	A vast expanse of low laying land, e.g. a fan or marsh
Bipad	বিপদ	Danger
Biśwās o Satya / Satta	বিশ্বাস ও সত্য	Faith and truth

Boiṣnab Tantra	বৈষ্ণব তন্ত্র	Vaisnava-Tantric fellowship
Cākurī	চাকুরী	Wage earner
Cāmṛā kāṭā	চামড়া কাটা	Skinning of dead animals
Cãndā	চাঁন্দা	Donation/ contribution
Chota Jāti	ছোট জাতি	Small or low jati
Dakṣiṇā / Dakkhiṇā	দক্ষিণা	Ritual gift
Dalādali	দলাদলি	Division, fragmentation into groups, factionalism
Dalil	দলিল	Land property papers or documents of ownership
Dalit (a)	দলিত	Oppressed, down-trodden and coerced
Dās	দাস	Servant
Demāg	দেমাগ	Overstated self-respect and status concern
Dharma	ধর্ম	Religion in a very broad and encompassing sense
Dharma anuṣṭhān	ধর্ম অনুষ্ঠান	Rituals/ceremonies
Dharma gõṛāmī	ধর্ম গোঁড়ামী	Bigotry
Dharma kāj	ধর্ম কাজ	Religious practices or good behaviour
Dharma śobhā	ধর্ম শোভা	Religious gathering or meeting
Dhārmikatā	ধার্মিকতা	Religiousness
Dikṣā /Dikkha	দীক্ষা	Initiation
Din majurī	দিন মজুরী	Casual labourer / daily labourer
Duskṛti	দুষ্কৃতি	A crime or damage to others
Ek-Ekā	এক– একা	One - Oneness

Ekāgratā	একাগ্রতা	Awareness or concentration
Ekatā	একতা	Oneness-Union
Glṛṇā	ঘৃণা	Hate and disgust
Gŏruke biṣ khāoyāno	গরুকে বিষ খাওয়ানো	Poisoning of cows
Gosăi	গোসাঁই	Lord and title of the Vaishnava Gurus
Gṛha pūjā	গৃহপূজা	Domestic rituals
Guṇ	গুণ	Physical-spiritual quality of substances
Guṇḍā	গুন্ডা	Gangster/Mobster
Guru / Gurudeb	গুরু / গুরুদেব	Guru
Gurujan	গুরুজন	Guru person/elders
Gusṭhī - gosṭhī	গুষ্ঠী – গোষ্ঠী	patrilineage, 'clan'
Hindu-dharma	হিন্দু ধর্ম	Hinduism
Hoglā samāj	হোগলা সমাজ	Lowest Muchi subdivision, living on the river banks
Jamidār	জমিদার	Landowner
Jāti	জাতি	Caste, species, socio-religious subdivision
Kabirāj	কবিরাজ	Exorcist
Karma	কর্ম	Karma, action and activity
Kartṛtta	কর্তৃত্ব	Authority
Karuṇā	করুণা	Supporting, compassionate and kind attitude.
Khāl	খাল	Canal
Khamatā / Kṣmatā	ক্ষমতা	Individual power
Khamatā - Śakti	ক্ষমতা–শক্তি	Power/ energy

Kharāp kāj	খারাপ কাজ	Bad deed
Khrīstān dharma	খ্রীষ্টান ধর্ম	Christianity
Khudra netā	ক্ষুদ্র নেতা	'Small' leader or headman
Kukarma	কুকর্ম	Bad habits
Kukhādya	কুখাদ্য	Food with a preponderance of badness or tamasik quality
Kuprathāguli	কুপ্রথাগুলি	Bad practices
Kusaṁskār	কুসংস্কার	Eating cow's meat / superstition
Lobh	লোভ	Greed
Mādulī	মাদুলী	Charm
Mahā mukti	মহামুক্তি	Mukti: liberation from false consciousness / illusion
Mahājan	মহাজন	Money lender
Mahāpuruṣ	মহাপুরুষ	Great soul
Mān sammān	মান সম্মান	Honour and respectability
Mānabikatā	মানবিকতা	Humanity/ humane attitude
Mānat	মানত	Promise or vow
Mandir	মন্দির	Temple
Mantra	মন্ত্র	Mantra, Vedic hymns and mystic words
Mānuṣ	মানুষ	Human being/ person
Marā chōyā	মরা ছোঁয়া	Handling dead animals
Marā khāoyā	মরা খাওয়া	Eating carrion
Marā māṁsa (māṅgsa)	মরা মাংস	Carrion meat
Māstān	মাস্তান	Rowdies

Mātabbar	মাতব্বর	Headman
Māyā	মায়া	Illusion
Maylā thākā	ময়লা থাকা	Living in a dirty environment
Miṭāno	মিটানো	Compromise and reconciliation
Muchi / Muci	মুচি	Muchi
Mukti	মুক্তি	Release, salvation or liberation
Mūrti - ṭhakur	মূর্তি ঠাকুর	Statue/image
Nām jog - Nām kīrtan	নাম-যোগ-নামকীর্তন	Bhakti ritual : singing of the names of God
Nām kām karā	নাম কাম করা	Nearness to God
Nāmī dāmī - śreṣṭho	নামী দামী - শ্রেষ্ঠ	Noble race
Nāstik	নাস্তিক	Atheist
Nicu Jāti	নিচু জাতি	Low jati
Nicu kāj	নিচু কাজ	Low job
Nicu kule-ati nicu	নিচু কুলে-অতি নিচু	Low place in society
Nirākār	নিরাকার	Formless/ incorporeal
Nirjātita	নির্যাতিত	Without jati
Niyam - kānun	নিয়ম-কানুন	The law and rules
Pabitra	পবিত্র	Sacred
Paṇ pratha	পণ প্রথা	Engagement
Pañagabya / Pacogabba	পঞ্চগব্য	The cow's five purifing elements : milk, curd, ghee, dung and urine
Pāp	পাপ	Sin
Pāṛā	পাড়া	Cluster of houses, and section of the village
Paribār	পরিবার	Family

Pārthakyo / Pārthakko	পার্থক্য	Separation
Patita	পতিত	Fallen ones
Petnī	পেত্নী	Female evil spirits
Prakṛta marmārtha	প্রকৃত মর্মার্থ	Inner meaning
Pratipatti	প্রতিপত্তি	High social status
Prem-bhālabāsā	প্রেম-ভালবাসা	Love
Pūjā	পূজা	Religious rite or celebration
Pūnya	পূণ্য	Merit and virtue
Purahit	পুরহিত	Priest
Rakta	রক্ত	Blood
Rakter thān	রক্তের থান	Strength of the blood
Ṛsi	ঋষি	Writers of the Veda
Sādhak	সাধক	A seeker of truth
Sādhanā	সাধনা	Asceticism, meditation and contemplation
Sādhu	সাধু	Holy man
Sākār	সাকার	With a form/ corporeal
Samāj baddhajīb	সমাজবদ্ধজীব	Social being
Śakun	শকুন	Vulture
Samājcyūta karā	সমাজ চ্যুত করা	Excommunication / ostracism
Samasyā	সমস্যা	Trouble
Samsār jīban	সংসার জীবন	Worldly life
Sanātan dharma	সনাতন ধর্ম	Eternal Religion / Hinduism

Sānnidhya	সান্নিধ্য	Nearness or proximity to God
Śānti	শান্তি	Peace
Sebā	সেবা	Service
Siddha - kāchā māl	সিদ্ধ–কাঁচা মাল	Cooked and raw material
Sidur samāj	সিঁদুর সমাজ	A middle segment of the Muchi group.
Śikṣā/Śikkhā	শিক্ষা	Teaching; also of the catechism
Śrāddha	শ্রাদ্ধ	Obsequies; ritual food consumption marking the end of pollution after a funeral
Srstikartā	সৃষ্টিকর্তা	The creator
Sukh	সুখ	Happiness
Swabhāb	স্বভাব	Nature, character
Swarge	স্বর্গে	Heaven
Tāmasik	তামসিক	One of the three qualities of substances: dark, dull and passive
Tār icchā	তার ইচ্ছা	"His wish" [God's]
Ṭhākur	ঠাকুর	Elderly person/ a caste/ Brahman, image of divinity
Thān	থান	Shrine, domestic shrine
Thār bhāṣā - Thāre	থার ভাষা – থারে	Rishi language
Triguṇ	ত্রিগুণ	The three basic qualities of substances
Trisandhyā	ত্রিসন্ধ্যা	Three times a day prayer
Tulsī	তুলসী	Basil
Tulsī mālā	তুলসী মালা	Basil necklace
Uccu śrenī /Ucu śrenī	উচ্চশ্রেনী – উঁচু শ্রেনী	High caste
Uddhār	উদ্ধার	Deliverance
Unnati	উন্নতি	Improvement or betterment

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	33	Baradal
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